

## Chapter 12

# Research-Based Instructional Literacy Practices

## *Challenges and Opportunities*

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### GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. How do you define research-based practices?
2. What role does research play in your professional practice?
3. What are the processes you employ when selecting instructional practices?

This is a terrific time to be an educator in adolescent literacy: Adolescent literacy is considered to be among the “hottest” topics by members of the International Reading Association (IRA; Cassidy & Cassidy, 2007); foundations support the writing of literature reviews, research, and policy statements (e.g., Carnegie Foundation, Ford Foundation); the federal government is funding adolescent literacy-related research (e.g., the Institute of Educational Science’s Striving Readers grants), and conference participants in unprecedented numbers are attending sessions that present information about adolescent literacy (Hinchman & Sheridan-Thomas, 2008). Topics related to adolescent literacy haven’t always been of such high interest, although the topic has been around since the early 1900s. Edmund Huey (1908), for example, recommended that students read in the “central subjects,” and E. L. Thorndike (1917) hypothesized that “perhaps it is in their outside reading of stories and in their study of geography, history, and the like, that many school

children really learn to read” (p. 328). During the 20th century, scholarship and practice related to adolescent literacy have attended mainly to the teaching of reading across the curriculum or “in the content areas.” But at the turn of the century, and currently, most scholars have broadened their interests to be more inclusive of the age group we are studying, youth and young adults, as they negotiate and engage in learning about their world and their place in it both in and out of school.

In this chapter I intend to provide a framework for Part II of this volume. Editors Karen D. Wood and William E. Blanton invited leading scholars to address topics such as assessment, motivation, differentiation of instruction, unique materials for instruction, vocabulary, comprehension, discussion, composition, grouping, use of the Internet and other technological innovations, and higher-order thinking. These topics are interesting to anyone involved in studying and teaching adolescent literacy. With standards of research and practice as a platform, innovative ideas suggested by these authors may be considered for implementation and critique. Even more fulfilling is that these ideas can be used to launch research to build on the lengthening chain of inquiry into adolescent literacy development and instructional practices.

This introductory chapter in Part II begins with the notion of “research-based instructional practices,” addressing questions such as “Where did they come from?,” “What are they?,” and “Why are they important?” Next, I critiqued the concept of research-based instructional practices, reflecting on the nature of research and what it means when an instructional practice carries that stamp of approval. I do not mean to deride or diminish the importance of research-based instructional practices, but I do attempt to place in the foreground a perspective that often seems to be missing when policymakers, publishers, and others promote “research-based practices.” Next, I summarize the literature related to research-based instructional practices in general and to adolescent literacy instruction in particular. I end with a strong recommendation: All adolescent literacy educators need to increase their research activity. All forms of research from multiple perspectives and situations are needed to enjoy the benefits of having research-based practices for adolescent literacy instruction.

## **Research-Based Instructional Practices**

I first became conscious of the term *research-based practices* in the mid-1980s. Two events come to mind: first, a research project I codirected; and second, the publication of *Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report of the Commission on Reading* (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985). The research project my colleagues and I conducted from 1986 to 1990 was the Reading Instruction Study (RIS; see Richardson, 1994, for a complete description of the study), sponsored by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI). Our purpose was to investigate why teachers reported that they did not use

“research-based practices” when they taught reading. After all, the authors of the landmark volume *Becoming a Nation of Readers* had written that “the knowledge is now available to make worthwhile improvements in reading throughout the United States. If the practices seen in the classrooms of the best teachers in the best schools could be introduced everywhere, improvements in reading would be dramatic” (Anderson et al., 1985, p. 1). But, according to the OERI request for proposals, teachers who were asked whether they used research to make instructional decisions reported that they did not.

I think the term *research-based practices* began to gain currency in educational rhetoric at about this time, although Stewart (2002) reports finding the term referenced as early as the 1800s. Other common terms in the educational lexicon, such as *pedagogy*, *methods*, *skills instruction*, and *instructional strategies*, lost currency and did not connote the same evidentiary standard as the term *research-based*. No doubt, certain policymakers agreed with Anderson and colleagues (1985) that if teachers would simply use research-based practices, then all would be well. This shift in terminology challenges us to ponder questions such as the following:

What is a practice?

How does a practice differ from a method or an instructional strategy?

What is a sufficient research base to qualify a practice as “research-based”?

What are research-based practices?

These questions are considered in this chapter.

In 1998, about 10 years after the RIS study and the publication of *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (Anderson et al., 1985), policymakers and the U.S. Congress requested that a panel of reading researchers and interested others, including teachers, administrators, physicians, and parents, “convene . . . to assess the status of research-based knowledge” (National Reading Panel, 2000, p. 1-1) about teaching reading, and to address the questions “What is the knowledge base?” and “What research is available for teachers to make instructional decisions?” In 2000, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) commissioned the National Reading Panel (NRP) to conduct a comprehensive review of reading instruction research. The panel chose a research paradigm that aimed, by purpose and design, to make causal claims:

To sustain a claim of effectiveness, the Panel felt it necessary that there be experimental or quasiexperimental studies of sufficient size or number, and scope (in terms of population served), and that these studies be of moderate to high quality. When there were either too few studies of this type, or they were too narrowly cast, or they were of marginally acceptable quality, then it was essential that the Panel have substantial correlational or descriptive studies that concurred with

the findings if a claim was to be sustained. No claim could be determined on the basis of descriptive or correlational research alone. The use of these procedures increased the possibility of reporting findings with a high degree of internal validity. (National Reading Panel, 2000, p. 1-5)

Given the Congressional mandate, it is understandable why the panel made the decisions it did, although the minority report (National Reading Panel, 2000) raises provocative objections. Yatvin, the author of the minority report, points out that the panel did not review topics inherently integral to reading instruction, such as language development, accessibility to literature, and adolescent literacy.

Policymakers at the federal and state levels have interpreted the findings of the NRP and have recommended and, in the case of Reading First federal funding, required that instruction, materials, and assessments be used only if they are consistent with the findings and recommendations of the NRP report. In my own state of Arizona, the Department of Education promotes instruction, assessments, and instructional materials that, it believes, carry a stamp of approval based on the NRP report. In meetings with employees of the Arizona Department of Education, I have often been told that research proves that there are five components to the reading process, and that only instruction, programs, and assessments that aim to teach those components are “research-based” and endorsed by the state for teachers, teacher educators, and authors of instructional materials to use. According to the federal policymakers, then, the notion of research-based practices is grounded in the findings of the NRP, which used a particular theory of reading acquisition and the “gold standard” of clinical research to advocate for particular practices related to that theory, and includes the following components: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. This way of thinking and doing undermines the nature of research, teaching, and learning, and is a gross oversimplification of what constitutes a teacher’s practice, particularly when considering research-based instructional practices for adolescents. In the next section I explain my distress over such a narrow conception of research-based practices, and end with an example from the RIS project.

### **Limitations of Policymakers’ Definition of Research-Based Practices**

The tightly woven, narrow construction of the term *research-based practices*, as conceived and implemented by Reading First and those associated with it, contradicts, first and foremost, the *nature* of research. Other concerns include the central role of curriculum in middle and secondary schools, the social nature of adolescents, and the heterogeneity of both teachers and students in middle and secondary schools.

### ***The Purpose and Nature of Research***

Policymakers and some uninformed educators assume that the purpose of research is to “prove” that something like a reading instructional practice “works.” Commonly, they argue that if a teacher employs a particular practice, reading achievement will most likely increase. This is the claim that the authors of *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (Anderson et al., 1985) made, perhaps naively or innocently. Those who describe the nature of research, however, disagree (e.g., Fleck, 1979; Kuhn, 1962). Bateson (1979), for example, wrote that the purpose of research is to *dis*-prove; he explained that science does not prove—it probes. The point is that in the real world of research, there is no final, once-and-for-all answer to a research question. Researchers, and those who use research, know that research *suggests*, but that the finding remains open to question and to further research. The current status of research-based practices, as promulgated by many educational policymakers, ignores this basic presupposition about the nature of inquiry. Fortunately, those who are involved in research understand this abuse of the research enterprise; but literacy educators must remain steadfast, and not allow the abuse to continue. Policymakers, and those employed to implement policies, are misinforming the public and their constituents as to the purpose and value of research, and are doing a great disservice to public education by doing so.

### ***The Central Role of Curriculum***

The core purpose of the secondary school is to invite young people to become acquainted with the major ideas represented by the disciplines. Secondary education in the United States has a long tradition of introducing the sciences, social sciences, arts, languages, English language arts, and mathematics to its students. These disciplines are organized into Carnegie units, and each student is expected to engage and learn the central ideas of the curriculum. Standards are established by professional organizations representing these disciplines, resource materials (all forms of media, text, original sources, artifacts, experiments) are provided, and teachers are specialists in the subjects they teach.

Herber (1970, 1978) argued persuasively that separating reading instruction—especially content-area reading instruction—from the content to be engaged is impossible. He demonstrated that print content is organized rhetorically in ways that represent the conceptual hierarchy of the discipline—the organization of the text is the form of the ideas; hence, reading strategies/practices need to provide support, or scaffolding, for the engagement of those ideas.

Research-based literacy practices are typically researched and described in ways that isolate them from any sense of curriculum. This is one reason why content-area teachers are reluctant to be persuaded as to the value of the practices. Teachers do not see a link between research-based practice and

conceptual content, and these teachers are committed to engaging their students in the ideas of the content.

### ***The Secondary School Is Social***

Research-based practices meet the criteria for being *research-based* because the conditions under which the practices are researched are rigidly controlled. Classic experimental studies focus on individual elements, such as the organization of information text instructional strategies, and create conditions that differ from the typical classrooms in which those elements will be placed. In addition, all students participating in a research study possess characteristics that set them apart from other students. Therefore, the elements studied must be considered in terms of their effects on individual students. In other words, classroom settings and students may look very much alike, but they are at the same time unique. Moreover, as Radenbush (2008) argues, “The social structure of instruction—the fact that it occurs within classrooms nested within schools—invalidates the canonical assumptions underlying the clinical trial” of the classical experiment (p. 207). Rarely will a research-based practice be transported into a classroom and “work” as it did in a research study. Teachers are called upon to modify research-based practices to fit their classroom conditions, the curriculum, and the needs of students.

If teachers use a research-based practice precisely as it was used in research studies, they are also limited in their capacity to take advantage of the social nature of young people and classroom interactions. As a high school teacher, I would not teach against the nature of my students, because doing so would invite student resistance and invite students to engage in power plays between them and me, resulting in dysfunctional classroom behavior. In addition, research suggests that students learn from each other, and that discussion strategies and critical thinking is often developed as students work together, either in small groups or as a whole class.

Moje (2007), who recognized and extended thinking about the social nature of the secondary school, curriculum, and instructional practices by identifying schools as a foundation of our democracy, asked what teachers do to teach for social justice and whether their teaching is socially just. Her question gets at the heart of what is wrong with a single-minded promotion of research-based practices. For example, some schools are assigning students to classes designed to teach them research-based practices in isolation from curricular content and their peers. Those of us who care about adolescents, and their literacy and learning, must weigh the value of any instructional practice we promote or use in terms of both our modeling of socially just behavior, and the opportunities that practices we use or programs we establish provide for youth.

### ***Research-Based Practices Are a Small Part of What a Teacher Does***

The typical high school teacher faces many challenges as she engages her students in the curriculum. Research-based strategies are but a small part of the

overall instruction. Shedd and Bacharach (1991) describe the “tangled hierarchies” in which teachers find themselves as they meet the demands of their multifaceted roles, including being instructors, counselors, and supervisors. As teachers fulfill these roles and orchestrate the many functions within each, it is clear that teaching is not “merely technical and rule driven, and teachers are not simply passive recipients who carry research-based practice to the classrooms. Rather, professional teachers are reflective; that is, they connect knowledge to situations through processes of observation, understanding, analysis, interpretation, and decision making” (Doyle, 1985, p. 32).

### ***The Heterogeneity of the Students in the Secondary School***

One thing that is known by anyone who has walked the halls of the modern middle or high school is that differences and diversity abound. Many different languages are heard, ethnicities vary, and the socioeconomic differences are great. It is necessary for teachers to make instructional and curricular adaptations to meet the needs of these diverse students. For example, it is common for teachers to have English language learners (ELLs) in their classroom. In such a classroom, the teacher needs to use and adapt practices to support ELL students (Rubinstein-Ávila & Johnson, 2007). Some research, such as that by Rubinstein-Ávila and Johnson, helps us to understand these individual differences. Educators of adolescents (e.g., Wood & Muth, 1991) suggest that unless we better understand what motivates and interests adolescents in developmentally appropriate ways, we can hardly begin to select appropriate practices. Ivey (1999) provides insights into the complexities of young adolescent readers.

Teachers are heterogeneous as well. Teachers’ backgrounds, content expertise, and theoretical orientations related to teaching and learning are diverse. Research-based practices, as promulgated by many policymakers and educators, tend to ignore this tremendous heterogeneity.

### ***The RIS Example***

Our experience in the RIS project (Lloyd & Anders, 1994) exemplifies each of these limitations. As I noted earlier, the goal of the RIS study was to study why teachers resist using research-based practices. First, we defined the term *practice*, then searched the literature for research-based reading instructional practices. We understood a *practice* to be an instructional strategy or method employed by a teacher that could be named, observed, and described, and whose research base suggested its value. Our search was governed by three selection criteria: (1) We sought practices published in peer-reviewed publications; (2) the article needed to name and describe a reading instructional practice, and provide evidence as to its efficacy in the classroom; and (3) the purpose(s) of the stated practice must have been to affect reading comprehension. Practices meeting these criteria were located through the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) and the references cited in synthe-

ses and reviews of reading research published between 1970 and 1985. After locating the studies, we categorized 89 investigated practices in 15 categories. For example, in one category, "Background Knowledge," practices included providing advance organizers, confronting misconceptions, and predicting story events. Our analysis included an estimation of the efficacy of the practice for teaching reading comprehension in grades 4–8. As a result of this literature review and analysis, we were confident that we had found practices with a research base that adequately justified their use in the classroom. We prepared materials that we intended to use in professional development activities for upper elementary school teachers to use when teaching reading comprehension.

The program of professional development included both individual and group components. The group component involved meetings at each of six schools for teachers to discuss and explore the instruction of reading comprehension. One way we made the research-based practices available was to provide to teachers a list of the practices we had found. During an initial professional development meeting, we distributed the list of practices to each teacher, described the categories of practices informally, and discussed ways that the practices might help to solve some of the teachers' issues in teaching reading comprehension. They were asked to read over the list, to consider the description we had provided, and to come to the next session prepared to discuss the practices about which they wanted to know more. Then, as a group, we intended to set priorities based on their requests and develop an agenda for our subsequent sessions.

This never happened. Teachers did not refer to the list during any of the professional development sessions, although we tried several times to engage their interest in the list. We carefully prepared presentation after presentation of the research-based practices. We did the best presentation we could, using all the techniques and strategies promoted by the best professional developers. Participants would sit back, take notes, and pleasantly nod, as if they were compliant with the suggestions being made. When we finished, a participant would bring up another topic, make a joke, or occasionally say that what we had presented sounded fine, but it wouldn't work at *this* school or with *these* students. They perceived the research-based practices as being general and not applicable to their local situation.

In contrast, teachers responded very differently when they were offered a research-based practice in the context of a proffered issue or problem from their classrooms. They made eye contact with us and leaned forward, indicating that they were seriously considering both the theory and the details of the practice. We ended up bringing a box of handouts prepared for all the practices we had gathered, so that *in a meaningful context*, we could provide the details to get them started using the practice. Teachers did use the practices presented this way, and our discussions during the professional development meetings were enriched by the teachers discussing analytically and critically the strengths and weaknesses they found in the practices they attempted.

Analyses of the professional development meetings and other study-related data revealed three barriers to the use of the list of research-based practices: (1) The practices, as initially presented, were decontextualized; (2) teachers' theoretical stances differed from the theoretical stance of the literature; and (3) teachers' real concerns were different than those addressed by the professional development goals of the project. Our discovery of "context" is important. We gave the participants a list of practices and despite our attempts to present them in interesting and practical ways; the practices were meaningless until they were related directly to the instructional problems presented by students and content the teachers were teaching.

The second barrier, theoretical contradictions, is also important. According to our analysis of teachers' beliefs at the beginning of the professional development program, the teachers reported believing that to learn to read, a child needed to acquire a specific set of skills. More to the point, they believed that students needed to read at grade level and demonstrate good listening skills, word attack skills, grammar skills, dictionary skills, oral reading fluency skills, and comprehension skills, such as being able to recall the sequence of a story. They used a basal reading program, with children's and young adults' literature as supplemental materials. In contrast, the research-based practices we had found in the literature were not designed to teach isolated skills; rather, the research-based practices we provided were based on an interactive model of the reading process, which emphasized the importance of a reader using strategies, such as activating prior knowledge, making predictions, summarizing, questioning, and so forth. This contradiction made it difficult for the teachers to understand the practices and even more difficult to visualize doing them.

This theoretical disconnect can be extended to the content orientation of secondary teachers. Pam Grossman (1995) reported that, based on their disciplinary expertise, high school teachers bring distinctive beliefs, theories, and practices to the teaching of high school content. Hence, a "research-based practice" that was researched with little or no attention to the conceptual content or with a single discourse or structure, such as social studies, is likely to not be very meaningful to a teacher of another content area, such as mathematics. Jetton and Alexander (2007) extend Grossman's report and provide a convincing argument that little is understood about the complexities of disciplinary domains, literacy, and teaching, and that much research is needed.

This contradiction suggests another barrier to teachers' adoption of research-based practices: At the heart of the matter, they questioned whether the practices we were recommending would improve the scores their students received on high-stakes achievement test they were required to take (Anders & Richardson, 1992). In other words, if they shifted their instruction, would their students do better, the same, or worse on the state test? We were amazed at what we thought was a disproportional amount of time spent during our meetings on discussions about assessment, accountability, and high-stakes

testing. In addition to teachers' concerns about student performance on the state test, they worried and disagreed about the importance of grades, how to give grades, and what grades meant to students and parents. Teachers wondered how to explain to parents the grades they had given to their children. They feared they would be "in trouble" with the principal or a school board member if they gave good grades to students who might not do well on the state test. Given the exponential increase in the amount of testing in schools today, almost 20 years after the RIS project, we can only imagine how much time and energy currently are driven by the emphasis on high-stakes testing and accountability.

What this all amounts to is that *research-based instructional practices* is a poorly constructed term that undermines the purpose of the research enterprise; oversimplifies teaching; and disregards the beliefs, theories, needs, and nature of teachers and students. Writing this chapter has forced me to struggle with what I believe the term means. Because of my experiences with the RIS project, I am reluctant to promote a practice, or a set of practices, without considering the teachers, students, subject area, and instructional norms of the school. Once these limitations are acknowledged and understood, reasonable educators can find value in the notion of research-based practices.

### **Toward a Definition of Research-Based Practices**

A glance at the results of an Internet search on research-based practices on Google or another search engine provides some perspective as we struggle to arrive at a reasonable definition of *research-based practices*. Such a search reveals a preponderance of medical references among the tens of thousands of entries. It is common in everyday language to speak of a physician's or an attorney's practice. Physicians and attorneys have long established the standards of their practice (in this context, *practice* is conceptualized broadly and generally as the work of the professional), and they know that if they abide by those agreed-upon standards of practice, they remain in good standing with their peers. They are obligated by their standards of practice to use the findings from research to make informed decisions as they advise their patients or clients. This is a far cry from the way that "research-based practices" are currently being conceptualized and imposed on teachers and students.

For the purposes of this chapter, we might think of a teacher's practice as the work of the teacher, complex as it is, and research-based practices as tools the teacher has at his or her disposal to engage students in literacy efficaciously as they construct understandings in and across the secondary curriculum. In their struggle to define best practices, Hinchman and Sheridan-Thomas (2008) arrived at the following:

We note, with some irony, that the phrase, best practices, can be contentious in the adolescent literacy literature because it hints of instructional practices suited to all youth, despite the fact that our youth themselves are about individuality,

with a wide array of differences in backgrounds, needs, and interests. Even so, research on literacy instruction does, indeed, either directly support or suggest a variety of tools that can be used selectively by responsive teachers to scaffold youth's development of self-regulated reading, writing, and alternative communication. We refer to best practices to signal the presence of such tools, not standardized practices to be used with every youth. (p. 1)

In other words, it seems that the intention of research-based practices might be more likely identified as *pedagogy*—the empirical reasoning and methods a teacher uses to engage students in learning through reading, writing, talking, and listening. Elizabeth Moje (2007) chose to use the word *pedagogy* rather than *practice* when comparing “socially just pedagogy” with “pedagogy for social justice” (p. 2). No doubt she chose the term *pedagogy* rather than *practice* to avoid the simplistic interpretations and implications of the term *practice*. What follows is a summary of the principles that seem to be fundamental to the selection of efficacious, research-based practices.

### Principles Guiding Research-Based Practices

The literacy literature provides information to help understand the idea of research-based practices by providing guidelines and insights in sources such as policy statements, articles, books, and book chapters. For example, the IRA (2002) position statement, *What Is Evidence-Based Reading Instruction?*, emphasizes the importance of external validity when selecting research-based practices (Creswell, 2003); that is, in addition to the standard criteria for evaluating research (that the report of a research study demonstrate objectivity, internal validity, and reliability, and that the study be published in a peer-reviewed or refereed publication), teachers should ask questions:

Do the students in the study resemble the students I teach?

Is the teaching and learning context similar to mine?

Will this strategy provide scaffolding to help students negotiate the ideas about which they are reading?

This advice is well-taken, particularly if we accept that research-based practices are instructional tools from which a teacher selects to help deliver literacy instruction to meet the needs of students as they engage meaningful ideas. Teachers need to be critical readers of research. Staff developers, administrators, and policymakers should expect teachers to ask for the quality and quantity of evidence supporting their recommendations of research-based practices. Critical consumers ask the following:

Who says a practice is best? What is the philosophical orientation of the author?

What is the basis for the claim, and how is effectiveness determined?

Who does the practice benefit, and, just as importantly, who does not benefit?

When is the practice appropriate? What is the advantage of one practice over the another?

Do the authors address educators as professional decision makers or as assembly line workers? (Moje, Young, Readence, & Moore, 2000, pp. 403–404)

“Research says” is not an acceptable response to a teacher’s inquiry. Research does not *speak*. However, researchers and practitioners can read, critique, and make informed decisions about the application of research-based practice.

In addition to using accepted standards to evaluate research, we in literacy have principles of practice that emanate from learning theory, linguistics, and psychology—the sciences of teaching and learning. Sturtevant et al. (2006) synthesized the literature related to adolescent literacy instruction and constructed eight principled practices representing that literature:

*Principle 1:* Adolescents need opportunities to participate in active learning environments that offer clear and facilitative literacy instruction.

*Principle 2:* Adolescents need opportunities to participate in respectful environments characterized by high expectations, trust and care.

*Principle 3:* Adolescents need opportunities to engage with print and nonprint texts for a variety of purposes.

*Principle 4:* Adolescents need opportunities to generate and express rich understandings of ideas and concepts.

*Principle 5:* Adolescents need opportunities to demonstrate enthusiasm for reading and learning.

*Principle 6:* Adolescents need opportunities to assess their own literacy and learning competencies, and direct their future growth.

*Principle 7:* Adolescents need opportunities to connect reading with their life and their learning inside and outside of school.

*Principle 8:* Adolescents need opportunities to develop critical perspectives toward what they read, view, and hear. (pp. viiviii)

These principles provide a gauge to choose and use practices, and to develop programs.

Moje and her colleagues (2000) had a similar idea when they commented that best practices in literacy needed to be selected with the mind-set of an ecologist. They suggested that an ecologist thinks in terms of relationships, and that this is what the educator concerned with adolescent literacy needs to think about. They write:

To our way of thinking, any unqualified claim that an educational practice is effective is quite a bit like claiming that watering plants is effective: It depends. The value of watering plants depends on the circumstances. Similarly, the value of K-W-L [what you know, what you want to know, what you learned from read-

ing], Reciprocal Teaching, Questioning the Author, sustained silent reading, study guides, and reading and writing workshops depends on how these fit the teaching–learning situation. Thus, we assert that the notion of best practice should be considered ecologically, focusing on relationships in particular settings. (p. 403)

Key among these relationships are the face-to-face interactions among individuals and teachers around literacy events. Questions reflecting this perspective include the following:

- Do classrooms display any passion for reading, writing, experiencing, and learning?
- Are expectations rigorous yet reasonable?
- Are individual learners' best interests foregrounded?
- Are reasons for teachers and learners committing themselves to literacy growth clear and convincing?
- Does a respectful and inviting community support self-expression?

This section has provided principles that may guide educators' consideration and selection of instructional practices promoted as being research based. These principles of professional practice go deeper than the overly simple and superficial notion of a research base. As I stated early on, however, I am not dismissing the notion that research-based practices do have utility.

### **Examples of Helpful Research-Based Practices**

Dolores Perin (2007) provides an excellent model of the sort of research-based practice recommendations that are extremely helpful to teachers. She describes a meta-analysis by Graham and Perin (2007) that arrived at 11 recommendations for teaching adolescent writing. The principles are powerful and sensible, but the valuable contribution of Perin's chapter in *Best Practices in Writing Instruction* (2007) is that she contextualizes the findings of the meta-analysis, providing for possible considerations and limitations that the teacher should think about before, during, and after using the suggested practices and strategies. Each recommendation is explained, the effect size is reported, and one or two studies are provided as examples of the research included in the recommendation. The 11 recommended principles (with mean weighted effect sizes and grade levels for instruction) are the following:

- Teach adolescents strategies for planning, revising, and editing their compositions (mean weighted effect size = 0.82; grades 4–10).
- Teach adolescents strategies and procedures for summarizing reading material, because this improves their ability to present this informa-

tion concisely and accurately in writing (mean weighted effect size = 0.82; grades 5–12).

- Develop instructional arrangements in which adolescents work together to plan, draft, revise, and edit their compositions (mean weighted effect size = 0.75; grades 4–12).
- Set clear and specific goals for what adolescents are to accomplish with their writing product (mean weighted effect size = 0.70; grades 4–8).
- Make it possible for adolescents to use word processing as a primary tool for writing (mean weighted effect size = 0.55; grades 4–12).
- Teach adolescents how to write increasingly complex sentences (mean weighted effect size = 0.50; grades 4–11).
- Provide teachers with training in how to implement the process writing approach when this instructional model is used with adolescents (mean weighted effect size = 0.46; grades 4–12).
- Involve adolescents in writing activities designed to sharpen their skills of inquiry (mean weighted effect size = 0.32; grades 7–12).
- Engage adolescents in activities that help them gather and organize ideas for their composition before they write a first draft (mean weighted effect size = 0.32; grades 7–12).
- Provide adolescents with good models for each type of writing that is the focus of instruction (mean weighted effect size = 0.30; grades 7–12).
- Use writing as a tool to facilitate adolescents' learning of content material (mean weighted effect size = 0.32; grades 7–12).

These recommendations are helpful to teachers, administrators, and policymakers. They are respectful of teachers' decision making when planning, implementing, and evaluating their instruction.

In terms of reading, no such meta-analysis of research-based practices was found; rather reading scholars have compiled books based on principles of practice, then suggest practices that are reasonable applications of those principles. Three examples focusing on adolescent literacy include Sturtevant et al. (2006), Hinchman and Sheridan-Thomas (2008), and Jetton and Dole (2007). Although not as concrete as the Graham and Perrin (2007) report, these books are respectful of decision-making capabilities and present theoretically based practices in context.

## Summary and Conclusions

This chapter has posed questions and issues for adolescent literacy educators to ponder when considering research-based practices. My intention has been

to open the discussion of what constitutes “research-based practices” by complicating and making the notion problematic. I do this in the spirit of inquiry and, by doing so, am consonant with the nature of the research enterprise and the realities of teachers’ professional obligations, commitments, and responsibilities. Specifically:

- I have rejected the simplistic definition of research-based practices. This definition is promulgated by those who suggest that a practice affirmed by a clinical-type experimental study is superior to a practice that a teacher creates or adapts to fit particular curricula and specific students.
- I have promoted practices that are flexible and adaptable for teachers who use research-based principles of practice, grounded in theory, and sensitive to the curricular and social context of classrooms and schools.
- I have suggested that we recognize research-based practices as tools a teacher has at his or her disposal to engage students in literacy.

These arguments lead to the conclusion that teachers are in the best position to select and adapt practices that research *suggests* may be appropriate for their use. Wise teachers are adept at reading research, knowing their subject-area content and students, and choosing and adapting practices that are efficacious for their purposes to meet student needs. Furthermore, this position acknowledges teachers’ professional obligations and responsibilities. Teachers who accept this responsibility will find themselves in the role of teacher-researcher as they create, adapt, and adopt practices. They will conduct their own inquiries to understand better instructional practices, their students, and their role as instructors. What a terrific time to be engaged in adolescent literacy!

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Discuss possible teacher research projects to advance the field’s understanding of adolescent literacy instruction.
2. Discuss your priorities when selecting practices to scaffold your students’ reading and writing.
3. Discuss your commitment to implementing research-based practices in your instruction.

### **Resources**

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