

Research-Informed Literacy Policy

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Over the last 20 years or so, the federal government and state educational agencies have instituted more reading-related policy than ever before (Coburn, Pearson, & Woulfin, 2011). This means that, before moving forward on the literacy curricula and instructional changes that must happen to meet the new Common Core mandates we are currently facing, we have the benefit of using yesterday's hindsight in adjusting our foresight. In looking back to see how earlier policies were implemented, we can take note of issues that may have affected smooth and effective implementation, so we can try to navigate it much better.

Analyzing earlier policy initiatives means accessing, analyzing, and applying the growing body of research that has been published on implementation of reading policy. This research, according to Coburn et al. (2011), is mostly concerned with how teachers respond to the reading policies and which factors cause teachers to respond in these ways. Of course, this is no surprise given that teachers are on the front lines of the literacy crisis. They are the ones who make the day-in-day-out choices that affect student learning.

One example of this kind of study is Coburn's (2004; as cited in Coburn et al., 2011) study of teachers in California responding to new standards of instruction. She found that teachers most commonly (49%) chose to assimilate the familiar aspects of the new policies into their current practices, while others rejected the new policies altogether (27%) or actually restructured their current pedagogies in order to incorporate the new policies (9%). This indicates that policy can influence actual instruction; however, noticing the 9% who actually incorporating the new policies in this case should cause us to proceed with caution.

In order to ensure that our reforms do not end up rejected outright or assimilated into old practices only superficially, there are a number of precautions we can take:

1. We can bring teachers into the reform process and allow their experience and expertise to help us make decisions, while granting them the professional respect they deserve.
2. We can ensure that our reforms are actually based on research, despite the “overstatement of the strength of research findings” (Coburn et al., 2011, p. 566) that often stems from policy makers by pulling in objective research experts to analyze and synthesize the information we need.
3. We can provide ample opportunity for parents and other stakeholders to have access to the new policies, curricula, and approaches to instruction as they are developing, so that everyone involved is able to give feedback and clear up misunderstandings. This level of transparency can serve to control doubt, confusion, resentment, and the like, while building camaraderie in the shared process toward something we can all believe in.

Does the research in literacy education have all the answers we need to revise our practice? No, it doesn't. One reason for this is that the field is in flux. Researchers are not investigating a sterile, controlled environment, so the findings from their studies are not foolproof or completely generalizable. We have to be able to read with an eye toward the possibilities and move forward as experts on our schools, our teachers, our classrooms, and our students.

Reference

Coburn, C. E., Pearson, P. D., & Woulfin, S. (2011). Reading policy in the era of accountability.

In M. L. Kamil, P. D. Pearson, E. B. Moje, & P. P. Afflerbach (Eds.), *Handbook of reading research*. (Vol. 4, pp. 561-593). New York, NY: Routledge.