

# RESEARCH CONNECTION

## Reading teachers' personal theory of literacy instruction

By Joe Stouffer, Ph.D.



### Why this research is important

Amidst charges that too many children are failing to achieve a satisfactory level of literacy development, there remain concerns surrounding the effectiveness of teachers. As well, debates of what is 'ideal' instruction that fosters reading success for children, all beg an answer to the question, "What do we mean by an effective reading teacher?" This research provides a framework to describe a range of approaches to reading instruction and defines components of teacher preparation and professional development. Shifting and enhancing teacher practice requires consideration of the dynamic interaction amidst teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and their choice of procedures and language in their classrooms.

### What you need to know

Teachers design and deliver their classroom reading instruction and activities drawing upon a personal theory. These personal theories are constructed and enacted according to the intersection of each teacher's knowledge, beliefs, procedure, and language. These four dimensions are interactive and integral to teachers' preparation, practice, and professional learning.

### How the research was conducted

I completed a descriptive study of Reading Recovery teachers (an early literacy intervention program), where I examined if and how those teachers transferred aspects of the literacy intervention to general classroom instruction. To qualify my findings as to if these transferences could be considered a more effective approach to teaching reading, I reviewed 24 recent (1996 and later) studies focused on describing the characteristics of highly successful reading teachers in Kindergarten - Grade 3. In these studies, effectiveness or success as a reading teacher was consistently defined, as the teacher's capacity to lift their students' reading outcomes above those of other teachers. Each reviewed study described effective reading teachers'

characteristics in different ways, so I created a framework to organize my findings and compare if those aspects were consistent with what has been described as exemplary practice.

### What the researcher found

I found that other researchers seemed to talk about the exemplary reading teachers from three viewpoints: what they did, what they knew about reading development, and what they believed was most important in reading instruction. Creating my framework, I set three broad categories of description: procedures, knowledge, and beliefs. I also considered the language and prompts teachers give to their students as an important and observable factor of teachers' practice. I conceptualized four dimensions: procedures, knowledge, beliefs, and language as interactive components of what I termed a teacher's personal theory of literacy instruction. Over time, drawing from their training and experience, teachers construct knowledge and form beliefs about how literacy develops and how it should be taught. Teachers enact their knowledge and beliefs through the teaching procedures and activities they select and language they incorporate into their instruction. Conversely, teachers' habitual practices, or what another teacher has shown or told them to do or say, over time, may become ingrained and shape what they understand or believe about how reading should be taught.

### How this research can be used

Understanding more of the how and why behind reading instruction is helpful to teachers to select, design, and critique reading instruction to better serve a wide range of learners. The reciprocal relationship among the four dimensions of a teacher's personal theory suggests that shifting teachers' practice may not be well attained by simply telling teachers what to do or say. I argue that effective teacher preparation and professional learning

needs to be broader than 'tips and tricks' but must assist teachers to build knowledge of how reading develops and determine what is most important in the process of teaching someone to read.

### Publication based on this research

Stouffer, J. (2016). A palette of excellence:

Contextualizing the reported benefits of Reading Recovery training to Canadian primary classroom teachers. *The Journal of Reading Recovery*, 15(2), 31–48.

### About the researcher

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