Back to Learning

How research-based classroom instruction can make the impossible possible

Les Parsons

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Doing What's Necessary

Teachers are already doing what's necessary—and designing, presenting, and marking lessons is merely the tip of the iceberg. Maintaining their balance against a tsunami of daily administrative, supervisory, extra-curricular, and communicative/collaborative tasks keeps them constantly in survival mode. When formal standardized testing or reporting to parents are added to teachers' duties, schools begin to shudder, steam, and hiccup like overheated leaky-valve engines.

Unfortunately, teachers are further handicapped in their efforts by shifts in the current educational climate. Teachers are discovering a troublesome trend in students' attitudes toward and approach to schooling, along with a relentless push by parents and school administrators to ensure that students achieve a standard expected by their parents. Newspapers constantly expose the scandalous levels of bullying in schools and no one seems to have a solution. Technological advances keep teachers on the defensive; the Internet revolution has left many teachers wondering about their relevance in the computer age and searching for ways to cope.

Far from being assured in and empowered by their own expertise and driven by professional commitment, many teachers feel confused, frustrated, and disenfranchised in the current educational climate. The research-based practice they encounter in their training is immediately subsumed by the realities of the workplace. What, when, and how they teach, and with what materials, are usually prescribed. How they evaluate learning and report to parents is also prescribed. Teachers quickly learn to do as they are told and to teach in the manner of their immediate peers.

Dramatic and permanent change in any of these issues seems unattainable. But teachers can alleviate the almost unbearable pressures of doing what's necessary by doing what's possible. A return to research-based practice will allow teachers to fulfil their necessary duties and, at the same time, regain their status as professionals. They need to base whatever they do in their classrooms on the best ways to teach and the most effective ways to learn. Empowered by knowledge, they can help shape a new direction and mandate for our schools.

But it's often difficult discovering the best ways to teach and the most effective ways to learn. Outdated or badly interpreted research has a way of becoming "truth." Over time, a huge body of this common wisdom infuses the profession, becoming the basis for its mandates and practices. It is seldom questioned, even

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when research and the reality of the teaching experience disprove those beliefs and methods. As a result, the methodology in schools can be an unsettling mix of misconceptions and assumptions with reality- and research-based practice.

See page 26 for answers to questionnaire.

Misconception or Research-Based Reality?

Read through the statements about learning and teaching, and decide which ones are misconceptions (M) and which ones represent practice based on how research reflects the reality of teaching (R).

1. Children praised for their intelligence are less successful at school tasks than those students praised for their effort. M or R?
2. Boys are better with math and science than girls. M or R?
3. Girls read and write earlier and more easily than boys. M or R?
4. Boys need an activity-based curriculum, while girls thrive in a more structured text-based environment. M or R?
5. Since boys lag behind girls in early education, boys-only schools give them a fair chance to compete among themselves and develop positive self-esteem. M or R?
6. Since girls are math-challenged, they should learn in separate classes with a math-focused curriculum. M or R?
7. Teachers need to devise right-brain or left-brain activities for different students with different learning styles. M or R?
8. Teachers should employ a variety of aids and programs to help students access and develop the 90% of their brain they never use. M or R?
9. Children born in January, February, or March will generally be significantly more developmentally mature than their younger peers. M or R?
10. The more some children are selected out of a group, streamed, and given differentiated instructional experience, the more likely it is that they will carry that initial advantage on through their school life. M or R?
11. Older students, such as teens, don't require the same kind of individualization that younger students do. M or R?
12. Cooperative learning leads to increased higher-level thinking skills. M or R?
13. Children streamed (i.e., grouped) for reading according to ability and kept in those groups over an extended period generally achieve higher reading scores. M or R?
14. High-stakes standardized testing produces results at the expense of education. M or R?
15. Grade inflation in our current schools is a myth. M or R?
16. Functional illiteracy in both the United States and Canada is about 42% of the population. M or R?

For a window into how confusing curricular beliefs can be, try the questionnaire above. Chapter 1, Doing What's Possible, will clear up any confusion about these statements and supply a research-based foundation for change. As with any change process, however, it's difficult to know where to start. In the midst of their

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crisis-filled days and inundated by the demands of their many responsibilities, teachers have a hard time maintaining a clear professional perspective. Focused as they are on a never-ending stand of trees, they can easily lose sight of the forest. What they need are a few basic principles to serve as the foundation for their teaching and the criteria against which any innovation should be judged.

Imagine, then, how a teacher's mind set might be revolutionized and the curricular dialogue changed if these three simple, fundamental laws of teaching were always followed:

The Three Laws of Teaching

1. Teachers must keep their students physically and emotionally safe;
2. Teachers must offer their students interesting and stimulating learning activities;
3. Teachers must keep their students feeling good about how they're learning.

Simple rules, such as these, would provide a litmus test for classroom teachers to apply to all their professional actions. As professionals, they would be required to resolve any dissonance between what they are told to do by their superiors and the rules that govern their classroom lives.

Teachers could use the three laws to better implement what they learn from current research to safeguard their students' self-esteem and individualize their classroom programs. They would immediately understand that tackling the corrosive issue of bullying must assume top priority in their classrooms and schools. As teachers struggle to define their role in the electronic age, the three laws of teaching can also transform how they look at and operate within the digital universe. Finally, the three laws can also serve as a springboard into the kinds of changes that classrooms of the future will certainly require.

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