

Rebecca Sitton's APPLESEED



PLANT THE SEEDS TO GROW SPELLING AND WORD-SKILL LITERACY.

What's Current?

What Counts as Evidence-Based Education?

I, like many of you, depend upon *Reading Today*, the International Reading Association's newspaper, to help me keep current on issues regarding our profession. In the December 2005/January 2006 issue, there is an article worthy of attention. It is Dr. Richard Allington's "President's Message," and can be read on the International Reading Association's website at <http://www.reading.org>. The article is in the Publications section of the website in the *Reading Today* subsection under "Sample Articles". His title for the timely monograph is: *What Counts as Evidence in Evidence-Based Education?*

Richard Allington, president of IRA, confirms that evidence-based education is hot! EBE, as it is referred to, is the current term for the older phrase, 'scientifically-based reading research,' and extends to subjects other than reading. And, as he asks, who wouldn't want to use methods and materials for which there is evidence that validates effectiveness? Nothing to argue about there!

EBE calls for two evaluative criteria. One element emerges from the older term—attention to the best available evidence gathered using "scientific" means to bear out positive outcomes. The second element proposes that professional wisdom gathered from experience is significant. The latter, according to the U. S. Department of Education (ED), cannot be overlooked in lieu of the former because scrutiny of scientific evidence suggests that there are limitations to this evidence base. Serious limitations.

In fact, according to ED, there are only two educational studies worthy of the label of support by empirical evidence. One confirms the value of reduced class size. The other is one-to-one tutoring for struggling learners. If these are the only two findings supported by multiple studies to confirm educational effectiveness, then on what basis should decisions be made for instruction? Surely not scientific evidence alone!

"The future may hold hope for more rigorous educational studies to provide direction at the state and local levels," Allington states, "but for now decisions must rely upon the professional wisdom that experience in the field provides." In other words, you're being asked to trust your own good judgment. Experience qualifies you and your veteran educator colleagues as gatekeepers for ensuring that instructional methods and materials are the best that they can be.

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What's Current? (continued)

Thank you very much, Dr. Allington! I appreciate this. Following is why.

Educators contact me daily requesting documentation that my Sourcebook Series for Teaching Spelling and Word Skills is supported by evidence-based principles. I've both studied and conducted spelling research and its practical application in the classroom for well over twenty years. So, I say, "Yes, the program reflects the absolute best instructional practices." But that's not enough. They need proof. To offer them support, I've gathered independent educators' studies that show how various skills included in the Sourcebook Series have improved with use of the program. Yet, sometimes this still isn't enough. These studies, because they were not conducted by "scientists," lack the required integrity for validation to meet the mandates of, let's say, No Child Left Behind, or the Reading Excellence Act, or their superintendent's official request.

Having been an author in my earlier years for spelling publishers whose office buildings grace the skylines of large cities, I know how their research was conducted on their educational programs, and I learned why it was necessary. It was, and still is, a marketing tool for them. They produced the research to make the claims that their programs worked. And they do work in this sense—students can spell well on the Friday test.

Long ago, I chose a road less traveled, and independently began an ardent pursuit of practices to teach students to spell where it counts—in their everyday writing. I can say without reservation that this has been an exciting journey, but it has been a mission that breaks with tradition—and tradition has deep roots.

I became convinced that a word list and a Friday test relied far too heavily on memorization for teaching long-term spelling ability. For students to spell well in writing, long-term spelling mastery is required. Initially, I had no idea how to supplant the traditional Friday ritual with a solid alternative. What alternative was there? With toil and time that included a complete study of the available research, ideas emerged. Real teachers tried them. Revisions were made for practicality. And, bingo! Discoveries! The classroom trials were nothing research-based, mind you. But, there was no denying that we were discovering what really worked. Finally, no more Friday tests and no more Friday spellers! So, wouldn't you expect every educator to embrace this? Not necessarily. It's different. It's not customary. Change is unsettling.

When I recently received a letter asking me for the "scientific" evidence to prove that words spelled correctly on a Friday test would not necessarily transfer to long-term mastery in everyday writing—well, what to do? Wait! Does any teacher actually believe that words spelled correctly on Friday are mastered? Where are the scientists with their empirical studies when I need them? After reading Richard Allington's article, I know what commonsense answer to give.