

Catherine Snow
Harvard Graduate School of Education

Lasting impacts: Making research robust and relevant

Many language researchers and discourse analysts share the goal of improving education. Thus I find it dispiriting how infrequently these researchers' findings – even those shown in rigorous studies to improve educational outcomes -- turn into tools or procedures that find purchase in the classroom. There are a number of points along the trajectory from development of a research question to production of results where the challenge of relevance or utility arises:

- Formulating the question: if the guiding question is formulated in collaboration with practitioners, so as to articulate an urgent problem of practice rather than an emergent research dilemma, the answer will more likely be relevant to practice
- Understanding the pattern of findings: very few programs, practices, or interventions work equally well for everyone in every setting. Expecting heterogeneity of impact will help us in targeting tools to the right groups.
- Creating concrete tools that embody the findings: research-based findings that enter practice as abstract guidance (teach structured phonics, use new vocabulary words recurrently, ask open-ended questions) are not effective in changing practice, except perhaps for highly gifted or experienced teachers. Most teachers need more scaffolding, e.g., a curriculum that supports the practice, or extensive professional development and ongoing coaching.
- Fidelity of implementation: ensuring that effective programs are scaled up with fidelity is a constant worry for researchers. But fidelity can be over-emphasized. We need to determine what aspects of the theory of change behind the program are crucial and which can be modified by the practitioners implementing the program, without threatening the program's integrity.

In short, making education research findings sustainable means embedding them more organically in practice, at every stage from the formulation of the research question to control over implementation in testing and in scale-up phases.