



RESEARCH REVIEW

Elizabeth Foster

WE'RE WORKING TO CLOSE THE GAP BETWEEN RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

The importance of making educational decisions based on evidence has never been clearer. Recognizing this, policymakers have emphasized evidence and reporting requirements in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), and we are heartened to see more educators and nonprofit leaders using research and evidence to inform decisions about instructional and programmatic choices, resource allocation, and planning. Many forces point to the need to stay on top of reading and understanding research studies related to professional learning.

Two challenges that arise in this pursuit are time and generalizability.

The volume of newly released studies can be overwhelming and hard to sort. Finding the time to do so is challenging. This column and the “At a glance” feature at the end of the magazine are two of the ways Learning Forward is addressing this challenge.

In addition, Learning Forward’s conference sessions must be based on a body of research. This not only expands the research base available but also links that research to broader applications and opens the dialogue about current research and research needed in the future. As Learning Forward’s Standards for Professional Learning emphasize, evidence and data are critical to relevant and results-based professional learning.

Learning Forward’s goal is to expand this curating of research studies and analyses related to professional learning to close the gap between research and practice. In the meantime, this column offers ways to learn more about research relevant to your current implementation choice or next problem of practice.

Generalizability is another challenge. A single randomized control trial study presents findings about a specific intervention or project under highly controlled conditions. While the study is of value due to its precision and what it adds to the evidence base, the ability to generalize from one study is limited.

Just as we don’t view each of the Standards for Professional Learning in isolation from the rest, practitioners and policymakers have to be thoughtful in the weight they give any particular study. In addition, interesting research about education programs or models often does not specifically address professional learning specifics.

We would like to see more studies about professional learning and its impact on teachers and students, school climate, teacher retention and development, and leadership. Studies may look at the impact on student outcomes of a particular school design or curriculum without delineating or defining the professional learning required to implement that curriculum or follow through on the design.

Increasing the amount of research focused on professional learning as well as elevating the inquiry about professional learning in studies is a priority we will continue to advance.

A recent exchange with researchers illustrates these challenges. In the last issue of *The Learning Professional*, this column featured a study about professional learning for writing. The lead author of that study said she appreciated our sharing the research with Learning Forward’s audience. She also cited additional studies of professional learning conducted with practice-based professional



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development for writing, reminding us that “a single study does not generalize, but a corpus of work can lead us to draw some conclusions about what might work.”

WHERE TO LOOK FOR STUDIES

The following are some of the resources that Learning Forward staff and consultants look to for studies that provide evidence and knowledge related to professional learning.

Journals. The American Educational Research Association has many journals, including *Educational Researcher*, *Review of Research in Education*, and *AERA Open*, a peer-reviewed, open-access journal focused on education and learning in various contexts, such as early childhood, after-school, primary, secondary, and post-secondary education.

We also look at the *International Journal of Innovation and Research in Educational Sciences*, *Nature*, and *Teachers College Record*, as well as publications from the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences and National Center for Education Statistics.

University research and policy centers. These are also excellent sources for studies and commentaries. The Annenberg Institute at Brown University posts a wide range of education-related studies prior to peer review at edworkingpapers.com.

The National Education Policy Center at the University of Colorado at Boulder publishes reviews of research, critically examining methodologies and the implications drawn from the research.

Media overviews and columns. These can offer good summaries and leads, such as research-focused columns like *Education Week’s* Inside School Research blog. Written by Sarah Sparks, the blog is a good source of research insights relevant to learning conditions or professional learning systems improvement. Summary emails from www.the74million.org provide a few sentences about the latest news and studies in K-12 and higher education. Round-ups such as these can help narrow down one’s reading list before delving deeply into studies.

Podcasts. Podcasts are a good way to get information about interesting new research, either via summaries by organizations or interviews with researchers themselves. The CPRE Knowledge Hub website (cprehub.org/research-minutes) is an excellent starting point. Each 20-minute podcast provides an overview of research about issues ranging from how educators experience standards-based reform to how well an online intervention encourages growth mindset development and academic achievement for students.

Research organizations’ websites. Use these as resources for studies about research and evaluation of particular models or programs, as well as other materials and resources. Websites to explore for studies related to teaching, learning, and human development include the American Institutes for Research, WestEd, and RAND. These resources can be used to inform school- or district-level decisions about sustaining and scaling a coaching program, learn about the costs and

benefits of an intervention or model, or find out how to use a study as a starting point for a discussion among practitioners.

Webinars. Webinars are another technology-enabled support for learning that can be watched in real time or at your convenience. Learning Forward’s website has many webinars that provide information about topics such as studies considered appropriate evidence under ESSA and studies that have contributed to the growing research base about effective social and emotional learning.

In addition, many nonprofit organizations and federally funded regional labs offer free webinars and other resources related to research, with the goal of supporting a more evidence-based education system. The mid-Atlantic regional lab at Mathematica has a free webinar on research about culturally responsive pedagogy and what is known about its effectiveness and implications for implementation, part of a series on the topic that includes guest speakers and examples of implementation.

These suggestions are just pieces of the overall puzzle, meant to suggest new resources or avenues for exploration. There are many, many more.

Learning Forward is actively building our lists of sources as we work to increase our contributions to the body of research related to professional learning. To that end, we are always seeking more resources and ideas as well as input from the Learning Forward community about what to read, what to highlight, and where to look. Please share your thoughts and ideas with me at elizabeth.foster@learningforward.org. ■