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Introduction

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1q87z8ws>

Journal

Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness, 9(2)

ISSN

1934-5747

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Publication Date

2016-04-02

DOI

10.1080/19345747.2016.1149006

Peer reviewed



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To cite this article: Sharon R. Vaughn, Christopher J. Lonigan & Carol McDonald Connor (2016) Introduction, Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness, 9:2, 151-152, DOI: 10.1080/19345747.2016.1149006

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19345747.2016.1149006>



Published online: 11 Apr 2016.



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Introduction

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In 2009, the Institute for Education Sciences issued a request for proposals to address mechanisms for improving reading for understanding. These awards were strategically aimed at addressing reading comprehension from prekindergarten through twelfth grade, and also at providing funds for developing an innovative assessment of reading comprehension. The goal was to provide substantial incentive for contributing to: (a) theoretical foundations of reading comprehension, (b) instructional strategies and other practices and materials across content areas to improve instruction in reading comprehension, and (c) developing a network of researchers who could accelerate our knowledge and expertise in reading comprehension assessment and instruction across the grade span. The proposal requested that district-level personnel be involved in the development of the interventions to assure that they were feasible for implementation within schools and sustainable within the structures of schooling. Additionally, the request was to establish a network of researchers that could break down what might be perceived as “walls” surrounding disciplines promoting the benefits from interdisciplinary influences.

Perhaps the statement in the request for proposals that indicated the hope and promise for these awards was the reference to Kennedy’s goal of putting a man on the moon. “President Kennedy’s goal to land an American on the moon within 10 years seemed almost unimaginable in 1961. Surely the goal of teaching our children how to read for understanding is as important to each child and to the nation as a whole as being the first country to reach the moon. The Institute believes that a tightly networked and coordinated group of social scientists can work together to accomplish the goal of rapidly increasing the nation’s ability to teach children how to read for understanding.”

Applying the rigorous scientific review process used at IES, ultimately six awards were made with five of the teams focusing on a range of questions related to theory development, observation studies, experimental studies, and longitudinal studies addressing a range of learners (e.g., typical learners, English language learners, students with disabilities, students living in poverty) as well as a range of grade groupings (age 4 through high school). The sixth team focused on developing assessments to improve measurement of reading comprehension. The six teams included over 130 researchers representing a range of disciplines including linguistics, speech and language pathology, special education, clinical psychology, developmental and cognitive psychology, neuropsychology, and many specializations within education, including educational psychology, reading specialists, and measurement experts.

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Considering the broad scope of research questions and studies conducted, this special issue of *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness* provides only a small glimpse into the work conducted through the Reading for Understanding Network. Both the studies and the commentary by Compton and Pearson offer some insight to the Network's search for "pressure points" for reading comprehension, which are comprehension-related variables that have a large enough association with reading comprehension to be practically meaningful, as well as potential for informing future directions in this search. These four articles each represent one small step on the path to increasing our knowledge of how to teach children to read for understanding. Many other studies from the Reading for Understanding Network are at various stages in the publication pipeline. They also represent advancement of knowledge regarding reading comprehension and associated processes. These studies and the studies reported in this special issue also demonstrate how interdisciplinary networks, supported by sufficient funding, can accelerate the creation of knowledge and the dissemination of this knowledge.