

Research Connections

Understanding the Local and Global in Adolescent Literacy: An Interview With Elizabeth G. Sturtevant

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Elizabeth G. Sturtevant is a professor of education at George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia, USA. Before entering college teaching, she was a social studies teacher, reading tutor, and reading resource teacher; she also taught in programs for special needs students and English-language learners. Her 33-year record of publications and presentations has centered on adolescent literacy with special emphases on secondary school contexts, literacy leadership, and, recently, international development. Along with numerous service roles, she served as coeditor of the *Journal of Literacy Research* from 2001 to 2007 and cochair of the International Reading Association (IRA) Commission on Adolescent Literacy from 2000 to 2004.

DWM: How do you view research–practice connections in adolescent literacy?

EGS: When I entered my doctoral program about 15 years after I began teaching, I believed the research aspect would be most difficult for me. To my surprise, I found that I enjoyed research, especially qualitative studies in which I could immerse myself in a school context and learn from the teachers and students. I learned that research can help us better understand learning, teaching, and schooling and design better instruction.

When looking at research–practice connections in adolescent literacy, understanding that there are many types of research is very important. Respecting teachers' knowledge and helping develop fuller understandings of adolescents' literacy needs also is important. All teachers can observe their students closely and use this information when developing units and lessons, and this should be considered a form of research. Formal studies related to literacy can be helpful, but educators need to be cautious about overstated claims said to be research-based that may be used in marketing materials. Teachers who are well-informed about literacy processes and instruction can work together to carefully choose or design programs that meet the needs of their own students.

DWM: How do you see your research as a university-based educator best connecting with secondary schools?

EGS: My research has taken place almost entirely within middle or high schools. In the 1990s I had the opportunity to study how high school social studies, mathematics, and science teachers made decisions about using literacy strategies within their content instruction (Sturtevant, 1996; Sturtevant, Duling, & Hall, 2001). This involved numerous observations, discussions, and meetings with students

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and teachers. From this work I gained perspective on the numerous pressures that affect teachers, and this has benefited me a great deal when designing professional development.

More recently, I have been studying the role of literacy coaches in middle and high schools. I have been looking at what literacy coaches do on a daily basis, who decides what they do, and what issues they face. I find the literacy coach role very interesting partly

because early in my career, in the late 1970s, I had a similar role in a large high school in Maryland. I know the frustrations of trying to be the sole *reading resource teacher* (the term used at that time) for teachers in a school of more than 2,200 students.

I have learned the value of literacy professionals serving in coaching roles at secondary schools to support both teachers and administrators (Sturtevant, 2003). Yet programs that implement literacy coaching need to plan effectively so the coaches' time is well spent and so both the coaches and teachers have enough freedom to decide what will work in their particular situations. Too often, I think, those who design programs for schools forget that a key element of effective programs is allowing participants to build their professional knowledge and then use this knowledge to determine what works best in their own settings (Sturtevant et al., 2006).

I also have conducted research in middle schools near my university in northern Virginia, just outside Washington, DC. Much of this work has related to English-language learners' motivation and their uses of language and literacy (Sturtevant & Kim, in press). Finally, I worked with a team of IRA volunteers to provide professional development for secondary teachers in the Republic of Macedonia. This work connected with my work on literacy coaching because

the project used a train-the-trainer model in which teachers took on the role of coaches in their own schools and regions (Sturtevant & Linek, 2007).

DWM: What exemplary research–practice connections have you experienced?

EGS: I find that most educators make very good research–practice connections. Teachers in my graduate classes, for example, will often try out strategies they learn about in class, even if this is not a course requirement. When they report back to the rest of the class, I find that others will use the ideas, often in adapted form, in their own classrooms. Teachers are hungry for locally tested practices that help students learn.

On the other hand, I often hear of misguided attempts at research–practice connections. Some policymakers, for example, have the misperception that teachers need to be pressured to teach effectively. Teachers may be required to implement practices that are decided by outsiders without input from school faculties. School policymakers and administrators should cautiously evaluate the purported research base of recommended practices or programs and find ways to include local teachers in the decision-making process.

DWM: How do you promote school-based professionals' own research–practice connections?

EGS: Over the past 10 years at my university I have helped design a master's program that prepares reading specialists. One facet of this program is a strong teacher–researcher emphasis. We believe educators need in-depth knowledge of the research base in literacy development—from early childhood through adolescence. We also believe educators need the skills to be able to determine whether certain instructional practices are effective in certain circumstances with certain students. Our master's degree candidates develop these skills in three types of practicums. In the first, they work with students from their own classes; in the second, they work with an individual child they have not met before; and in the third, they work in mentoring another teacher. Along with these research-based practicums, the candidates design a

teacher–researcher project that explores a question of personal interest.

DWM: What lines of research do you think deserve more attention by secondary school practitioners?

EGS: Teachers as well as school administrators benefit from knowing both traditional and emerging areas of research within adolescent literacy. For example, reading comprehension strategies that help students understand texts have been developed over more than 25 years, and they should be part of the toolkit of every teacher. However, educators also need to be aware that literacy involves more than traditional text comprehension. Adolescents today use a wide array of literacies that are important in their daily lives, school learning, and future interactions in the workplace and society.

Numerous educators currently are providing a wealth of research-based ideas about including multiple literacies into the school curriculum. For instance, in recent issues of the *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* Zenkov and Harmon (2009) presented an urban school's project in which students share their perceptions and lives with digital photography. Jacobs (2008) explored instant messaging and its relationship to writing proficiency. In my view, these and similar reports deserve attention by secondary school practitioners because they show possibilities for instruction that connects the curriculum with students' interests, increases motivation and engagement, and builds creativity and learning.

DWM: What is the most productive new direction that adolescent literacy research might take?

EGS: In addition to the multiple literacies research just mentioned, I think adolescent literacy researchers should increase their focus on how to reach diverse learners more effectively. This is especially important given the current economic situation that makes funding for educational programs more difficult throughout the world. In many developing countries,

for example, children and youth often do not have the opportunity to attend school for a sufficient number of years. I urge us to think globally when we think about adolescent literacy. I also encourage our adolescents to think beyond their own locales and develop understandings about people and issues in other parts of the world.

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