



The Handbook of Research on Teaching the English Language Arts. 2nd edition.
James Flood, Diane Lapp, James R. Squire, and Julie M. Jensen, eds. Mahwah, NJ:
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Scholars and practitioners alike will welcome this latest edition of the comprehensive sourcebook for research on the teaching of the English language arts. Editors Flood, Lapp, Squire, and Jensen have retained the five-part organizational focus of the 1991 edition, including sections on: historical and theoretical perspectives for English language arts teaching and learning; methods of research on English language arts teaching; research on language learners; environments for English language arts teaching; and research on teaching specific aspects of the English language arts curriculum. Many of the original articles remain, revised to reflect significant research of the past decade. In addition, the volume includes 18 new contributions. The oversize *Handbook*, sponsored by the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English, features 75 articles and 136 contributors. It represents a range of independent voices offering current theoretical perspectives and future speculations on the teaching and learning of English language arts.

The opening article, Squire's "History of the Profession," invites readers to re-interpret the past in light of contemporary conditions for teaching and learning. Conversely, many contemporary problems, trends, or research findings take on new meaning when examined through the lens of historical scholarship. This macro/micro process informs the review of research literature in many of the *Handbook* articles. The authors combine the best scholarship with a focus on one particular issue, phenomenon, or theoretical view. Given their eminence in the profession, the results are noteworthy. Consider the 400-plus references that Anne Haas Dyson and Sarah Warshauer Freedman provide for their chapter, "Writing." In bibliographic terms alone, the *Handbook* establishes a valuable niche for itself.

Few readers, perhaps only doctoral students, will read this reference cover to cover. Such a process would be akin to reading an entire professional library, book by book. Researchers will more likely read selectively, taking advantage of the *Handbook's* vast synthesis of findings in such diverse but overlapping areas as linguistics, rhetoric, child development, literary theory, educational policymaking, research methodology, multicultural and bilingual issues, teacher preparation, assessment of students and teachers, curriculum, reading and writing instruction, spelling, grammar, vocabulary, oral language, technology, and media. The historical and theoretical grounding of the articles affords readers simultaneously a holistic overview and specifically framed insights. The



discovery of relationships among these diverse perspectives can only advance knowledge about the ways people teach and learn the English language arts in American classrooms. Moreover, analysis of historical research across specialty areas encourages replication studies and improved methodology for future investigations.

The need for an updated *Handbook* reminds us that knowledge is never static. As Marie Clay notes in "Child Development," "knowledge about children gained from research should be checked at quite short intervals, since today's research populations may be responding differently from the original research populations" (p. 51). Ever-changing contexts for teaching and learning the English language arts challenge or confirm our professional understandings and assumptions. Bertram Bruce and James Levin, revising their 1991 article on new technologies in language arts, find that "...many of the specific applications described in the previous version ... are irrelevant or have been superseded by technological development. Still, some of the general conceptions of the computer's role stand up well" (p. 649).

M. C. Wittrock, assessing contemporary methodological issues and future directions in research on the teaching of English, reminds us "individual research studies rarely directly influence practice. Through the synthesis of research studies, theories and principles either find support or find a lack of it, and then influence practice" (p. 280). The *Handbook* offers not only individual chapters by authors who have synthesized a given body of knowledge, but also the opportunity for readers to synthesize theories and findings across specializations. Cognitive and affective language processes are essentially invisible activities. Learning itself is sufficiently ambiguous and complex to challenge the most sophisticated research methods. The *Handbook's* diversity in terms of contributors and topics creates an intertextual data bank. Their dialogical association with other chapters in the volume subtly colors the meanings of individual chapters, because they were written or revised within the same historical time frame.

For instance, chapters in Part IV, "Environments for English Language Arts Teaching," deal with elementary, secondary, family, and technological zones for literacy. Other chapters focus on ability tracking, curriculum planning, and evaluation/assessment issues. Considering the varied demands and implications of all these environments yields insight into any one of them.

In such a massive volume, it is tempting to consider what is missing or under-reported. Individual readers may wish for more representation of technology issues, or ESL research, or even visual literacy. Given the steadily increasing importance of economic and political issues, and of legislative mandates in educational policy planning, one could argue for a Part VI, with more chapters like Hoffman, Paris, Patterson, Salas and Assaf's, "High Stakes Assessment in the Language Arts: The Piper Plays, the Players Dance, but Who Pays the Price?" Since research studies are widely used as evidence by legislators and other policymakers, it behooves us all to collect data about the effects of any given policy. As Dole and Osborn write, "We know reading scores declined in California in the



early 1990s, but we do not know exactly why. We know they are beginning to go back up again, but we lack systematic gathering of data as to why" (p. 637). Future research will surely reveal more about the complex symbiosis between theory and policymaking.

The editors have assembled a summative interpretation of nearly a century's worth of scholarly inquiry into the English language arts. Educational policymakers, teacher educators, and teachers will find much to guide their future research and practice, as well as much that illuminates current issues and conditions in the nation's schools. The *Handbook* is a collaborative effort to unify the many concerns, objectives, levels, and subject areas of the English language arts. Collectively, the authors have made an enormous contribution to teachers, researchers, and to the field itself. Co-sponsorship by the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English adds to the impressive weight of this effort.

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