

National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASET)

THE PRACTICAL TEACHER

This Month's Topic:

Trusting Information Resources

Maybe you've heard on the news recently something like this: “Exciting results today from a research study showing that children who have...” Or maybe you have heard from a parent of a student you teach, “Have you thought about XYZ intervention? It just might work for my child”. Sound familiar? Ever had your interest piqued by such news of research with children who have disabilities? We know we have. Education research is great, because it can help us find new (and hopefully better) ways of doing things, such as educating our children with disabilities. But when your research sources are friends, the internet, or the popular press, how do you know if you can trust that information? This issue of NASET's Practical Teacher discusses five factors to keep in mind when considering research findings.

1 | **Consider the source.**

Where did you hear about the research? Somehow it's easier to accept research as truth when the claims are supported by personal testimonies. A personal story engages the emotions and makes the information seem already “verified.” But it's important to recognize that not all research claims deserve your trust. Use the enthusiasm and interest sparked by the personal story to pursue a more complete understanding of the research at hand.

2 | **Investigate for biases.**

Who conducted the research? What organization/institution are they affiliated with? Do they have an agenda? Do not assume that, because a person is a doctor or claims to be an authority, they automatically merit your trust. Knowing if researchers are affiliated with a trusted university, institution, or government agency is helpful. If, however, you find out the research was produced or funded by a group with a political or commercial agenda, the researchers may have been inclined to only release findings that support that group's interest.

3 | **Publication matters.**

Where were the findings published? Research published in a peer-reviewed research journal carries much more credibility than those published elsewhere. You can be more confident that the research claims are trustworthy if they've been reviewed by other researchers before being published.

4 | Find out who and how many.

Who participated in the study? Find out more about the types of people who took part in the study. How closely do the participants resemble your person of interest—your students, your child? The closer, the better.

How many people participated? In general, you want a large and diverse pool of participants. A study conducted with a small number of people can yield misleading results that don't generalize to the rest of the population. In fact, the smaller the sample size, the harder it is to conclude that the study's outcomes were because of the intervention being examined.

Exception! It's helpful to know, however, that there are plenty of examples of high-quality research with small samples. Single-subject research (which, as the name suggests, involves a small number of individuals) is common in special education research, and is particularly useful in studying interventions for students with rare disorders.

5 | Location means a lot.

Where was the research conducted? If you live in the U.S., you'd probably wonder if a classroom intervention study conducted in Papua, New Guinea is actually relevant to you. And that would be a good thing to wonder about! But also be cautious about studies that have been conducted in substantially different settings from where you live or teach. That can make the study's results less relevant to your particular situation.