

What works in education: Don't let perfection be the enemy of the good

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Within the last 15 years, education research has been transformed from an academic backwater into a sophisticated scientific discipline. Particularly in the areas of the evaluation of program impact and the measurement of teacher effectiveness very talented scholars have entered the field and demonstrated that methodologically rigorous research that answers important policy questions is feasible and productive. Whereas 20 years ago there was serious doubt that the multi-faceted and complex world of education could yield its secrets to canonical science, there are now many existence proofs. With the methodological high ground in hand, it may now be possible and timely to think of education research less as a dichotomous discipline divided between weak and strong methods and more as a continuum in which the counterfactual for judging any particular methodological approach is not the gold-standard multi-site randomized trial but the existing state of knowledge and its supporting methods. If, for example, we know almost nothing about the differential effectiveness of instructional materials being used in schools, then studies of the natural variation between student achievement and instructional materials may substantially improve the chances that more effective instructional materials will be identified. Comparative effectiveness trials of those materials would, of course, allow stronger causal conclusions and generate fewer errors in decision making. But absent such trials and the feasibility of mounting them, the best obtainable evidence will nearly always be better than no evidence at all. This presentation will develop the argument for valuing research based on its ability to improve the odds of good decision making rather than based on a standard of perfection in design, implementation, and analysis.