

## Interview With Naomi Zigmund, Ph.D.

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**The Meadows Center:** What do you think is the most common public misconception of research in your field?

**Dr. Zigmund:** The most common misperception of research in the field of special education is that the outcome of research will show us one best way of doing things. Kids with disabilities are a small group of students, but they're quite unique in their particular disabilities and needs, and we have found that they need unique treatments. That is, each one of them needs to be dealt with quite individually.

When talking about educational research in general, where we're talking about large groups of students, it's very important that we look for the way that will help most students the most. And so we do look for one best way to teach reading or one best way to teach mathematics or one best way to teach social studies or science. But when it comes to students with learning disabilities, I think the search for one best way is misguided. When we talk about research in special education, we should be thinking about what are the unique characteristics of kids that require us to do one thing or another, as opposed to how we can get teachers to do the one best thing.

**The Meadows Center:** What do you think is the most important research finding in your field for practitioners?

**Dr. Zigmond:** The most important finding is that teachers need to accept the proposition that if a student didn't learn it, you haven't taught it properly yet and that good teaching means monitoring student progress and adjusting your instruction based on how the students respond to that instruction. Monitoring progress is the evidence teachers should be looking for to know that they are doing evidence-based instruction. We can take stuff from research articles and implement them in the classroom and hope that we're doing it right and that we're going to get the outcomes that they got in the research, but each time an evidence-based practice is used in a classroom, it's used by a different person with a different group of kids in a different context, and the outcome isn't necessarily going to be exactly the same as it was in the research. So the practical finding is that you need to be monitoring the progress of your own students in that instruction and adjusting the instruction when it isn't giving you the results that you want.

You can't pull instructional practices off the shelf and just implement them. It just doesn't work like that because the context is very important and how the teacher implements is very important. And even if they implement with fidelity, they may not get the same results because of the group of students, the dynamics in the classroom. You know, teachers talk about how this group of second-graders is very different from last year's second-graders, and so if that's the case, what you did last year may not work with kids this year—even though what you did last year and you're trying to do this year are both published in a very

good journal and have very good data on how, in general, most students respond to that practice.

So I think teachers need to remember to monitor their instruction, to monitor the progress of the students, and to be very self-critical. It's very easy to fall into the trap of saying, "Oh, those kids—they just won't pay attention; they just don't learn" instead of saying, "What am I doing that isn't getting through?" and taking real responsibility for instruction. But not just instruction—also learning, so that if they didn't get it, you didn't do it right.