

Is CRISS® Based on Solid Research?

You bet!

By Dr. Carol Santa

This summer (2001), Lynn Havens and I did something quite dramatic. We cut our ties with the Kalispell Public School District. Project CRISS has been growing so rapidly, that both we and the District felt it was time to dissolve our partnership. It's a little scary, though, and has caused Lynn, our Master Trainers, and me to do considerable reflection. As one might expect, many of our conversations dealt with keeping CRISS research-based and up to date.

As I write this article, I am in the midst of doing research and writing for the third edition of the CRISS training manual, which we hope to have available sometime during 2002. Although CRISS has always had a solid research base, it has been interesting to me to see how our original work has remained loyal to the *current* research. Since many of you may have taken your first CRISS class several years ago (or more), I thought you might be interested in seeing how CRISS continues to fit with the latest research.

When you think about it, CRISS represents an integration of research-based practices from a variety of disciplines--not just reading. Research in reading comprehension, in models of teaching, in reading engagement, and in school change all support the principles and strategies in Project CRISS. Just as CRISS serves to unite diverse content areas with a common language and philosophy, it also brings together diverse lines of research. Understanding CRISS within this bigger picture becomes key to project development and implementation.

Reading Comprehension Research

Let's start with a few comments about reading comprehension research. A critical line of research underlying Project CRISS has to do with the teaching of comprehension techniques vs. the testing of comprehension. Dolores Durkin's classic study published in 1978 in the "Reading Research Quarterly" probably did more to launch CRISS than any other single piece of research. She observed over four thousand minutes of reading instruction and saw only 20 minutes of what she considered to be comprehension instruction. Teachers tested comprehension, but they did not teach it. They assigned students selections to read and comprehend, but they did not teach or show students how to use comprehension strategies.

Even though her work led to a flurry of instructional research studies designed to improve comprehension instruction in schools, it is discouraging to learn that not much has changed over the last two decades. Pressley (2000) noted that the situation in schools is practically the same "with a great deal of testing of comprehension but very little teaching of it".

While this conclusion is disturbing, it does show that CRISS, with its process of comprehension strategy instruction, continues to address an important need in schools.

Probably the best research supporting the actual content of Project CRISS comes from the work of the National Reading Panel. Given that I have already discussed this report in another article (see “[The National Reading Panel Supports CRISS](#)”), I will make only a brief mention of it here. An abstract of the report can still be found on the web site <nationalreadingpanel.org> [scroll down to “Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching Children to Read”], and the complete report can be ordered, for no charge, from the U.S. Department of Education. While there has been considerable criticism of this report because of its narrow focus, the portion which reviews research on comprehension strategies strongly supports the mission of CRISS.

Models of Teaching Research

The conclusions from the research on models of teaching fit exactly with CRISS. This research examines the effects of "transactional strategies instruction" (what CRISS calls modeling, guided practice, and student application) on reading achievement (Duffy & Roehler, 1987; Anderson & Roit, 1993; Brown, Pressley, Van Meter & Shuder, 1996). It's hardly a surprise that transactional strategies instruction leads to improved reading, and yet it's good to have some hard data directly supporting the CRISS model of instruction

Reading Engagement Research

Another line of research which dove-tails with CRISS is the work on reading engagement. As educators, we want students to leave our classrooms as lifelong readers, writers, and learners. Engaged learners have internalized a literacy passion—they have a desire to read, write, and learn.

In a review of research which defines the factors conducive to reading engagement, Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) note that there is a direct relationship between reading engagement and achievement in school. In fact, reading engagement compensates for low family income and educational background. Highly engaged students simply achieve better in school irrespective of background and income.

So what does this research say about Project CRISS? What's intriguing is that so many of the factors which Guthrie and Wigfield describe as contexts conducive to reading engagement are the same as those for CRISS. For example, motivation is strongly dependent on a student's perception of his or her own competence in using strategies. When students feel competent in strategy use, their attitudes about school and their motivation to learn increase. Another factor has to do with learning and knowledge goals. Students are more motivated to learn in classrooms where the emphasis is on understanding, rather than on getting the right answers. Both of these features, strategy

knowledge and content understanding, are, of course, fundamental to the mission of Project CRISS.

Another conclusion from the work on student engagement has to do with the professional environments for teachers. Literacy engagement occurs in classrooms where professional environments within the school are healthy for teachers. Teachers must succeed before students can succeed. Students tend to be more highly motivated in classrooms where teachers are not only treated respectfully within the system, but where they work within a dynamic community of teacher-learners. These are situations where teachers work collaboratively from a foundation of shared beliefs, have opportunities to do their own research, make curriculum decisions, and simply have time to "talk shop". MMMM! Sounds a lot like our CRISS implementation model! Remember, when teachers are engaged, so are their students.

School Change Research

Finally, our implementation model fits with the key principles underlying research on school change (Fullan, 1993, 1999). Change begins with an individual voice, a dream-maker (*a CRISS facilitator within a district*), someone who begins to nudge teachers into examining their teaching practices. Change involves collaboration, time for good ideas to converge into a common plan. When this plan is corroborated with outside knowledge from research and experts (*Level 1 workshop*), the chance for successful change increases. Finally, change happens when learning environments are healthy for teachers and when teachers come together to share their own discoveries (*follow-up sessions*). All of these principles match our own views of how to insure a successful implementation of CRISS.

The future of Project CRISS looks bright. Lynn, our Master Trainers, and I know that Project CRISS will continue with its solid research base and high standards of quality. After all, we are a national network of teachers unwilling to accept the status quo. We are dream-makers who have the wild idea that every child should leave our classrooms as an engaged and competent reader, writer, and learner. Our wild ideas are taking hold in schools everywhere across this country. CRISS works because we practice fundamental principles about what to teach, how to teach, and how to change entire school systems, so that students have the opportunity to become who they have a right to become. Now, that's down-right cool!

(Dr. Carol Santa is the senior author of the Project CRISS training manual.)

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