

## EDITORS' INTRODUCTION



### Put on Those Dancing Shoes

The second edition of the *Handbook of Research on Teaching the English Language Arts* (Flood, Lapp, Squire, & Jensen, 2003) provides a fascinating contrast that sheds light on the status of narrative in literacy education research. Early in the volume Stotsky and Mall (2003) argue that “one must distinguish academic research from personal narratives describing a successful teacher’s philosophy, approach, and experiences in the classroom” (p. 134). Such narratives, they argue, cannot be considered academic because they lack professional detachment, instead relying on highly subjective judgments that raise doubts about the inquiry’s validity. Several chapters later Alvermann and Hruby (2003) argue for a consideration of fictive representation as a way to give research the “richness of lived experience” while maintaining its “integrity” (p. 270). Such narratives, they argue, can bring to educational research what Ellsworth (1997) calls “suspense, romance, seduction, visual pleasure, music, plot, humor, tap dancing, or pathos” (p. 21; cited in Alvermann & Hruby, p. 265), helping readers to resonate with the experiences of those represented in the research.

Significantly, these opposing views regarding narrative, detachment, and

validity come from recent or current editors of some of literacy education’s leading journals, Sandra Stotsky, who served as editor of *Research in the Teaching of English* from 1992-1997, and Donna Alvermann, who has co-edited both the *Journal of Literacy Research* (1999-2001) and *Reading Research Quarterly* (2001-present). Their different perspectives on research have great implications for the field, not just for authors who must decide where to send manuscripts, but in terms of what the most widely read and respected journals offer as exemplars toward which researchers guide their work.

The contrasting perspectives provided by these influential scholars illustrate the ways in which what counts as research is now being contested in ways it has never been before. Just ten years before these editors offered such different views, the first edition of the *Handbook of Research on Teaching the English Language Arts* (Flood, Jensen, Lapp, & Squire, 1991) did not mention narrative inquiry. It surely did not include attention to the fictive representation encouraged by Alvermann and Hruby (1993), a form of research presentation championed by Elliot Eisner and opposed by Howard Gardner in an AERA panel discussion tran-

scribed and published in *RTE* during Stotsky's editorial term (see Saks, 1996).

In our term as editors of *RTE*, we have chosen to engage the debate in another way: by publishing the best of what is submitted regardless of its ontological orientation or methodological perspective, leaving questions of the validity and impact of different approaches up to the field. We think that the papers in this issue provide evidence for how the field is enriched by a multiplicity of methods. We think they also provide evidence for the argument that in discussing the place of narratives in educational research, one must think not only of narrative presentation but also of narratives as an object of study and narratives as sources of evidence for empirical arguments.

Attending to narratives in research is crucially important because they can inform people's lives in profound ways. Bruner (1986) echoes James in calling narrative one of the two primary modes of cognitive functioning. He argues that narratives allow one to traffic "in human possibilities rather than in settled certainties" (p. 26). Booth (1988) claims that "We all live a great proportion of our lives in a surrender to stories about our lives, and about other possible lives" (p. 14). Coles (1989) provides a moving testimony to Booth's position by sharing a student's remarks about the power of story:

When I have some big moral issue, some question to tackle, I think I try to remember what my folks have said, or I imagine them in my situation—or even more these days I think of [characters in books I've read]. Those folks, they're people for me. . . . They

really speak to me—there's a lot of me in them, or vice versa. I don't know how to put it, but they're voices, and they help me make choices. I hope when I decide "the big ones" they'll be in there pitching. (p. 203)

Gerbner, the former Dean of the Annenberg School of Communication, expressed a similar sentiment in an interview (Jensen, 1998): "The stories we tell about the world help form the world in which we live" (p. 17).

Recognizing the power of stories seems to us to bring with it the imperative to think hard about their effects, for if stories can heal, they can harm as well (Smagorinsky, 2001, Smith, 1999). If narratives do indeed have the power to help and to hurt, they need to be subject to scrutiny: What stories are told? Through what media, and under whose sanction, do stories find voice? Whose stories are most likely to be told? What functions do stories serve for the teller? How are they heard and understood by various listeners? What might they reveal about the speaker? Each article in this issue of *RTE* addresses one or more of these fundamental questions in a compelling way.

The first article is the text of the talk that Bob Fecho gave upon receiving the 2001 Alan C. Purves Award for the article in volume 36 of *RTE* most likely to have an impact on educational practice. Fecho argues that the conventions of reporting research following the format specified in the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (American Psychological Association, 2001) may alienate teacher researchers and keep them from enter-

ing into conversations with the larger research community. Fecho argues that teacher researchers tend to introduce their research by telling the story of the study in all of its rich contextual detail. Such narratives, he maintains, often provide a more relevant and useful framework for understanding a teacher's inquiry than does the traditional approach of framing a study through a review of pertinent scholarship. Fecho argues against the monolith of the *APA* format by asserting that all studies, even those purporting complete academic detachment, contain multiple stories; any report, he argues, is, therefore, necessarily partial. Fecho advocates greater inclusiveness among researchers for the forms that diverse investigators find relevant to their work. Doing so, he believes, will enrich the field both for the diversity of avenues these forms provide for entering a study and the range of researchers who are given voice in empirically-based discussions of teaching and learning.

Brian White takes up stories in a different way. He undertakes a careful examination of Nel Noddings's notion of caring, a construct that has had enormous influence in the field. While generally admiring Noddings's formulation, White critiques her discussion of the need for reciprocity and her argument that principles interfere with the relational work that caring requires. White illustrates his disagreements with Noddings through a reinterpretation of two stories that Noddings uses to exemplify her argument. In addition, he offers alternative narratives to illustrate what he sees as a more humane vision

of caring. White argues that his critique of Noddings falls within the tradition of research exemplified by Lensmire's (1997) analysis of writing workshops in which Lensmire provides narrative documentation for his points. We believe that White's work and essays like it have a place in *RTE* because of the rigor of his analysis, which he manifests through his careful reading of Noddings's work and his thoughtful explication of both ancient stories and narratives from the lives of more modern women.

Jenifer Jasinski Schneider's study is a more conventional empirical research report that makes use of qualitative methods. She presents case studies of three students and the writing they did in the multiple contexts provided by their teacher, building each on systematic observation and analysis. She documents the idiosyncratic processes these young writers employed, arguing that their divergent approaches challenge any attempts to characterize the writing process in monolithic terms. She asserts that for the young writers in her study, writing was a performance for both self and others. In casting her participants as actors in a classroom drama, Schneider invokes the conventions of storytelling. Schneider's research qualifies as the kind of rigorous and systematic inquiry that Stotsky and Mall (2003) call for. At the same time the wealth of detail she provides allows her focal students to come alive in a similar fashion to characters in literary texts. Schneider's focal students will, we imagine, resound for those who consider children's writing in workshop settings, much as literary characters did

for the student described by Coles (1989) who hoped to hear their voices when life presented him with “the big ones” (p. 209).

Recognizing that narratives are important in schools, Betsy Rymes focuses on two contrasting approaches to eliciting narratives from an elementary school child for whom English was a second language. She finds that one teacher’s carefully orchestrated and well-intentioned attempts to elicit narratives through literature-based instruction were unsuccessful while another teacher’s less structured attempts to elicit narratives after a lesson was complete were much more successful. Rymes argues that researchers can benefit from paying more attention to talk on the margins of lessons as a site in which important literacy learning may take place. These transactions in the *third space* (Gutiérrez & Stone, 2000) of classrooms often reveal what Ballenger (1999) calls the *shadow curriculum*, the

purposes for schooling that comprise the students’ agenda; and these agendas are often played out through the narratives through which students construct and relate their social worlds.

The articles in this issue, then, all draw on narratives as the topic of inquiry or as evidence for their claims about literacy teaching and learning. The authors demonstrate that attention to narrative can enable educators to present emic studies in rich and resonant ways, to critique theoretical claims through consideration of human experience, to share detailed portraits of literacy learners, and to inquire into the contexts that encourage students to become storytellers. The debate over what counts as research in general and the place of narrative in particular is unlikely to be settled anytime soon. We think that these articles will serve as powerful voices in that continuing discussion.

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### **Meade Award Winners**

The 2002 Richard A. Meade Award for Research in English Education was presented to Todd DeStigter, *Literacy, Democracy and the Forgotten Students of Addison High: Reflections of a Citizen Teacher* (NCTE, 2001) and Cathy Fleischer, *Teachers Organizing for Change: Making Literacy Learning Everybody's Business* (NCTE, 2000).