

Editors' Introduction:

ANNOUNCING THE ALAN C. PURVES AWARD: ON THE IMPACT OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

In 1993, Carl Kaestle, then president of the American Educational Research Association, asked a blunt and provocative question: "Why is the reputation of educational research so awful?" Many critics have argued that research is often obscure, pointless, and produced to advance careers rather than to inform or improve the human enterprise. Such research, they claim, spins the wheels of individual intellects without advancing the cause of practical knowledge. In the field of literacy education, Donald Graves (1980) offered an influential criticism of elementary school research, arguing that it "wasn't readable and was of limited value. It couldn't help [teachers] in the classroom. They could not see their schools, classrooms, or children in the data" (p. 914). In Graves's view, when the emphasis of publication is on impressing other researchers, publications tend to be written in sterile, technical language that removes all sense of immediacy and vitality from classroom events, thus alienating teachers from the very studies purportedly being conducted for their benefit. Little wonder, then, that educational research has developed a reputation for being awful.

How awful? Awful enough for teachers to routinely dismiss research and researchers as irrelevant to their classrooms and to consider teachers and researchers as breeds apart. One unfortunate consequence of this dismissal of research is that teachers often don't see themselves as researchers. Another is that teachers often don't see their colleagues at universities as real teachers who share many of their concerns.

We think that things are beginning to change. The field is presently developing structures to support teachers who research their own classrooms and provide them with vehicles for sharing what they find through their inquiries. More and more university teachers are examining their own practice or working in close collaboration with teachers outside the university. Yet our sense of the field as a whole is that the well-entrenched dichotomy between teaching and research remains firmly in place in the minds of many.

As long-time teachers ourselves in both high schools and universities, we feel strongly that practice and research should have a symbiotic relationship. We have found research and practice to be strongly interrelated in our own work. Both our own studies and our reading of other research

have helped us see ways of thinking, ways of observing, ways of inquiring, and ways of teaching that we could not have envisioned without the understandings gained through studies of teaching and learning. In addition, our experiences as teachers have provided the basis upon which we have accepted the claims we have read in published reports. In other words, our evaluation of a study's validity has come not only in terms of the research design and procedures but also in the extent to which the research rings true in terms of our own experiences with students. When we have undertaken our own investigations, at times of our own teaching, our research questions have originated for the most part in the problems we have faced in the classroom and in our quest to teach more effectively. To us, the idea of separating research from practice, or researchers from teachers, goes against what we know to have stimulated our own best work. Many of our greatest moments as educators have come through our synthesis of research and teaching.

Yet in order for teachers to seek this synthesis, the research that they conduct or read needs to be useful, to have an impact. By this we mean that it should inform the way we think about and engage in our practice. We want to stress that we are not encouraging research to tell teachers what to do on Monday morning. The research that makes the greatest impact, we believe, encourages a re-examination of assumptions that may underlie broad beliefs about teaching and learning and results in reflection on key issues in education rather than in the documentation of an effective teaching practice. What we do on Monday morning is surely important. Our concern in publishing *RTE*, however, is with how we think about teaching the rest of the year. Research that has an impact should speak to issues that matter in the development of pedagogical and conceptual tools for more effective education and not claim to demonstrate instructional ideas that teachers can import unproblematically to their own classrooms.

In our editing of *RTE*, we are trying to ensure that the articles we publish have an impact on our readers; that is, that they help our readers think carefully about their research and teaching. To encourage and honor such efforts we have established an award to recognize research that is likely to have a significant impact on teachers' understanding of literacy learning and/or teaching, naming it in honor of past *RTE* editor Alan C. Purves, who died at the end of 1996. Alan helped to serve as part of the conscience of the NCTE research community, particularly in the area of reminding us of the need to produce useful studies. In an *RTE* forum in October, 1995, Alan argued that much research in literacy education is "at a dead end" and is "an exercise whose importance I consider questionable at best." At the heart of his critique was his belief that too much research is undertaken simply to advance a professional agenda, a

motive that sometimes leads to making overblown claims, minimizing and misrepresenting the work of other researchers, developing general instructional prescriptions that are insensitive to the nuances of human behavior, and oversimplifying the messiness and complexity of teaching and learning. Purves was concerned that research often ends up being conducted more for the advancement of the researcher than for the advancement of the field. We wish to honor his memory through an award that identifies the *RTE* article that makes the greatest contribution to our understanding and conduct of educational practice.

As we look about the field, we find that we share Purves's concern for the value of research. We do not, however, share his pessimistic view that little current research is of any value. In our term as editors we have seen manuscripts that speak to important questions, explore them in compelling ways, and make arguments that have helped us rethink our experiences in classrooms. We hope that the articles we have published, and will publish in the future, will continue to be relevant to and inform the field's concerns. One way to encourage the publication of useful studies is to honor annually the *RTE* article that speaks most clearly and importantly to teachers' beliefs about what matters.

The judges for the award will include elementary, secondary, and post-secondary faculty who have established some relationship with *RTE*, such as serving on the editorial board, serving on NCTE's Standing Committee on Research (which has oversight on *RTE*), participating in our external review process, or subscribing to *RTE*. Through this award we hope to increase the involvement of K-12 teachers in evaluating research, elevate the importance of teaching at the university level, promote research as a useful activity among teachers at all sites, make researchers more aware of the need for consequential work, and help to break down the teacher/research, K-12/university distinctions that serve none of us well. The award would be presented according to the following rules and guidelines:

1. The award shall be called *The Alan C. Purves Award* and shall be presented to the article judged most likely to have a significant impact on teachers' understanding of literacy learning and/or teaching.

2. The award shall be presented annually to the author(s) of an article published in *Research in the Teaching of English* during the previous year's volume. Judging will take place during the summer between volumes. The award may be split between two or more authors if the judges cannot agree on an individual winner. (Editors' note: Beginning in 1998, *RTE*'s publication schedule will change from volumes that follow the calendar year to volumes that follow the academic year and will move to publication of issues at three-month intervals. Volume 32 will include the February and May issues only. Volume 33 will include issues published

in August and November of 1998, and February and May of 1999.)

3. The panel of judges shall include equal representation from teachers at elementary, secondary, and postsecondary sites. Judges should be affiliated with *RTE* by being subscribers, reviewers, and/or editorial board members. The panel will be chaired by a member of the Editorial Board.

4. The winner shall be announced at the annual Fall NCTE Convention. The forum for the announcement will be determined annually.

5. The winner shall receive a plaque and a lifetime subscription to *RTE*.

Introduction to the Current Issue

We feel that the studies we publish in this issue illustrate a number of different ways in which research can have an impact. Todd DeStigter explores what happened when he and his colleagues brought together a group of ESL students and a group of low-achieving native speakers of English. While we believe that many will find the details of the program evocative, we believe that his careful and extensive reading of John Dewey and his thoughtful consideration of how his project speaks to Dewey's concerns, will have an impact on how people think about such fundamental notions as what it means to foster democratic communities.

Charles Elster's study of the impact of text and instructional context on students' emergent readings demonstrates what we feel is perhaps the most effective way to avoid the problem of overblown claims, one of the most significant problems Purves noted: developing a line of inquiry that relates to a specific theoretical issue. Building on his own previous research as well as the research of others, he argues for what he calls a transactional model of emergent reading, one that recognizes that reading performance depends on the particular text being read and the particular context in which the reading occurs as well on the reader's level of development.

In the third article in this issue, Marguerite Radencich, Kathy Eckhardt, Rebecca Rasch, Sharon Uhr, and Dena Pisaneschi explain a series of practitioner research studies on journal writing in the elementary grades and consider the effect that the graduate course for which those studies were done had on the way the studies were conducted and reported. What we find most striking in this study is the way that it demonstrates that the dichotomy many perceive between teachers and professors is a false one. We see that the same kind of concerns that the teachers had about journal writing led the university professor to reflect on how she teaches her research course and how she collaborates with colleagues in the schools. We think that their paper, which they characterize as a piece