EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

In the editorial in which we announced the Alan C. Purves Award (*RTE*, Vol. 32, No. 1), we explored what has become an all-too-common critique of educational research: that it simply doesn't affect practice, in part because teachers can't "see their schools, classrooms, or children in the data" (Graves, 1980, p. 914). Acting on the belief that research should reach teachers and inform their practice, some journal editors with whom we have spoken will only publish studies that are located in typical settings, those that would seemingly make it most likely that teachers could generalize the findings to their own classrooms.

We share the belief that the research we publish should be useful. We do not, however, agree that only studies conducted in conventional settings involving mainstream populations can have an impact on the field as a whole. Historically, looking at the atypical has resulted in landmark shifts in thinking about teaching, learning, and other aspects of human development and cognition. Vygotsky's (1987) disagreements with Piaget came at least in part through his replications of Piaget's studies with slight, yet significant changes, such as introducing deaf children into social groups, thus disrupting what Piaget had found to be normal interactions and causing new social orders—and consequently, new theories of development—to emerge. Gardner (1983) advanced his theory of multiple intelligences following his study of brain-damaged patients in order to explain how neurological systems are structured so that intelligence in one arena does not predict intelligence in another. Both of these examples illustrate the ways in which attending to contexts or participants not typically included in educational studies can change the way we think about both the unusual and the usual.

The articles in this issue illustrate the potential importance of studying settings, participants, and practices not typically considered in educational research. In so doing, each study refracts our ordinary vision and helps us see teaching and learning in new ways. Joyce Magnotto Neff studies writing instruction in a distance education program that broadcasts to remote sites via a television network. Writing instruction is typically framed as an activity that takes place in a classroom environment in which the teacher and students meet face-to-face, an environment that allows for unproblematic notions of, for example, what counts as being present

or absent. By studying writing instruction through an atypical set of mediators, Neff is able not only to shed light on what is becoming an increasingly common medium for instruction in higher education—distance education—but also to re-envision conventional beliefs about writing instruction in traditional settings. Connie Mayer's analysis of the strategies that deaf children employ while learning to spell leads her to challenge the belief that printed input is the most effective way to give deaf students access to the world of the hearing. At the same time, studying a population that problematizes such notions as inner speech complicates the question of how cultural artifacts mediate all children's literacy development. Shelley Peterson challenges the conventional belief that school assessment practices are typically biased in favor of males by investigating the assessment of middle school writers' production of narratives, a genre that Peterson argues favors girls. By looking at two atypical variables—middle school students and narratives—Peterson complicates research on gender and schooling by pointing to assessment practices that can work in favor of girls.

This set of articles is noteworthy for a second reason. As *RTE* editors we have made an effort to encourage the generation of more formal reports of practitioner research, a kind of research often represented as the province of K-12 teachers. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993), for instance, contrast teacher-researchers with university researchers and argue for greater stature for the knowledge generated by practicing K-12 teachers. We think that the practitioner research conducted by Neff, who studied her college teaching, and Mayer, who studied the first- and second-grade deaf students with whom she was working as a resource leader, suggests that *all* teachers can benefit from reflective inquiry. Moreover, their studies reveal why we agree that the knowledge gained when practitioners carefully examine their teaching and their students' learning ought to be held in high regard, for both studies demonstrate how practitioner research can inform the work not only of the teacher who conducts it, but also the thinking of practitioners and researchers far afield.

Like others, we have expressed a belief in the need for diversity of method, site, population, and other factors in educational research. We offer these studies as illustrations of the ways in which studying the atypical affords a view of teaching and learning that makes visible and helps us rethink what we take for granted.

M.W.S. P.S

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