

Thoughts from the Editors



Considering the Past to Think about the “New”

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NCTE’s Centennial Celebration provides an opportunity to reflect on decisions we, as a community, have made. In many ways, we’ve made great strides. Kindergarten is offered everywhere, and pre-kindergarten is often available. In recent years, too, digital tools have found their way into most classrooms. At the same time, however, large gaps in opportunity still exist. The decisions made in the 1990s and 2000s overemphasized “the basics” to the detriment of higher-order, shared, and multimodal learning that would best serve our students’ futures.

Teachers spend so much time in the moment that we often fail to take periodic pauses to consider what we are doing and why. When we are pulled out of the moment, it’s often because of how quickly life around us is moving. Rapid globalization is changing the demographic makeup of our classrooms. Political changes are affecting how we, as teachers, will soon be evaluated and compensated in many American states. We are asked to respond urgently to the arrival of digital textbooks over the next several years and to consider the role of technology in our classrooms.

In the past decade, considerable attention has been devoted to “new” literacies—communicating dialogically; maximizing the use of images; and allowing for self-direction by students, a concept (presumably) not thought possible before. Yet, as the articles and departments presented in this issue demonstrate, these ways of thinking develop from the past.

In This Issue

We at *Language Arts* took NCTE’s Centennial Anniversary as an opportunity to pause and reflect

on literacy and literacy instruction and how they have shifted over the past 100 years. As editors, we responded to the anniversary by issuing this call to *Language Arts* readers: “How has literacy shifted and in response to what? How have instructional textbooks, tools, and teaching changed over the years? Today, most of us think of technology in digital terms, but years ago, ‘high-tech’ might have meant that the book could be printed in paperback as well as hardback. What other technologies have influenced our classrooms, homes, and communities? As we consider these historical roots, in what ways might we expect literacy to branch out and grow?”

Authors responded to this call with thoughtful approaches that ask us, as readers, to think historically about literacy instruction. Jim Hoffman and Nancy Roser introduce “beautiful books,” in which young children tell the stories of their lives through pictures and words. After situating the classroom practice historically, they describe how it can be used in classrooms today, ending with an appeal for the application of the beautiful book concept with second language learners.

Lisa Hawkins and Abu Bakar Razali provide an overview of the three predominant approaches toward the teaching of writing in elementary classrooms over the past 100 years: handwriting, product, and process. The authors describe each of these three phases in terms of the historical periods in which they prevailed, while acknowledging how they were recursive, and, at times, confounded. For example, they note that handwriting and emphasis on the final written product have resurged in recent curriculum and state policy documents.

Sharon Murphy traces the treatment of reading as pleasure from the early 1900s to present day through a close examination of Ontario’s educational policy documents. Alongside this descriptive path, she lays out broader societal factors that have influenced the changing nature of how literacy and literacy education are constructed. The article concludes with descriptions of work by teachers and researchers that should prove helpful for teachers interested in increasing their students’ pleasure in reading in their own classrooms.

In the Research and Policy Department, Beth Maloch, Randy Bomer, and Amy Burke examine policy and professionalism in the earliest issues of the journal now called *Language Arts*. In these early issues, they found both progressivism and scientific management shaping policy and practice; above all, however, they found the early journals a home for open professional discussions. Lillian Reeves, Amy Lachuk, and Diane Deford use their column, “The Things They Carried: 100 Years of Literacy Learn-

ing and Scholarship,” to review professional books that consider literacy and literacy instruction in terms of their sociohistorical contexts. In the Children’s Literature Department, Jonda McNair, Alan Bailey, Lesley Colabucci, and Deanna Day present a selection of “Great Books for Sharing and Reading with Children in Grades K–8.” And finally, in *Conversation Currents*, Bess Altwerger, Ken Goodman, and Yetta Goodman discuss how reading instruction and theory have changed over the years, as well as how reading has become a political hot topic.

We have enjoyed working on this issue of *Language Arts*; it has afforded us time to look back over the rich, progressive nature of our literacy and instructional histories. For, as Maloch, Bomer, and Burke remind us, “It is inspiring to look closely at a time when things were done differently, because it provides a kind of experiment in innovation—things have been different, and they can (and will) be again.”