Reading the articles for this open call issue, we were struck by a common theme: the tremendous instructional potential of spending time with students’ classroom contributions, be they spoken, written, or drawn. Over the past few decades, elementary and middle schools have received a great deal of attention from various groups, most notably politicians and the media. Calls for accountability and rigor run parallel to finger pointing, and teachers and children’s communities frequently find themselves the pawns in “blame games.” As learning objectives increase in number and difficulty, the stakes associated with the results seem to increase in severity, regardless of how flawed or inappropriate the assessment used to measure them. Instead of admonishing teachers and children, we propose giving them time.

In a 2014 study by the National Center for Literacy Education (NCLE), the respondents reported that “collaborative planning time” is the most powerful support for teacher learning. Collaborative groups—sometimes called professional learning communities, critical friends groups, lesson study groups, or inquiry groups—can motivate teachers to reflect on their work with knowledgeable peers while improving instruction across the whole. What’s missing? Time. That same NCLE study found that 36% of US teachers had less than 30 minutes per week for “structured collaboration with others” in 2013. And the picture seems to be getting worse. The percentage of teachers with substantial time for collaboration (that’s two hours or more) has decreased from 41% in 2009 to 18% in 2013.

Statistics from the US Department of Labor suggest that this decrease in time for teacher collaboration may have something to do with the increase in public school enrollment (over 800,000 students have been added) while the teacher force has been steadily decreasing. Schools are scrambling to cover classes amidst tightening budgets and bulging rosters. What would happen if, instead of mandates for documenting mastery of an endless number of standards across numerous subjects, we considered an alternative?

What if teachers were faced with the unlikely demand that we, the people who spend approximately 170 days per year with children, were given the time to prioritize seeing, hearing, and learning from these children? If instead of working from a list of what children should be able to do, teachers were then given time to consider and identify children’s current capabilities and personal aspirations? Sometimes what we noticed might call for a response; other times it might call for continued watching and thinking. And what if students who need a little extra time to feel comfortable with a new topic, perhaps because they speak another language or have strengths in an area not prioritized in today’s schools, weren’t labeled deficient, but were contemplated in terms of their strengths and given the extra time needed? What if students were presented with a new topic through occasions that allowed for tinkering and play?

We, the editors of Language Arts, support what the authors of this issue show—that teachers and students need time, more than anything—time to watch, time to listen, and time to reflect on their learning. Teachers need time to talk with each other about teaching, and time to assess the ongoing learning and social needs of their students.
Specifically, we might suggest that novice teachers need time and support as they learn about their profession, while seasoned teachers need time and support to continue to refine and shift pedagogy, to grow in their knowledge of their areas of expertise, and to practice as new classroom contexts emerge (e.g., language diversity, shifts in technology). We note that, like their teachers, students must also have time, both as individuals and as a community of learners, to work through and reflect on their learning. With such support, they learn to look at ideas from multiple perspectives and to take up the academic tools they’re expected to use.

Though taking this time might mean departing from the close-to-real-time data gathering the field has been working toward, we believe the merits of the shift far outweigh the costs. Indeed, though simple, it might be the most radically useful shift we could make in the promotion of student learning.

In This Issue

In “Career Dream Drawings: Children’s Visions of Professions in Future Workscapes,” Jennifer Turner explains how educators can use children’s career dream drawings to better understand their students. She then uses study findings to report how elementary children envisioned future professional lives and the role of literacy in those lives. Like Turner, Sara Ackerman contributes to the discussion of how teachers can learn from young children’s composing/creating in her article “Becoming Writers in a Readers’ World: Kindergarten Writing Journeys.” Her investigation into the relationship between reading and writing as her kindergarten students developed reader and writer identities again asks teachers to consider carefully, and then build on, the work children are doing in early childhood classrooms. Foundational to this sort of classroom, of course, is the centering of writing within literacy curriculum and instruction.

Also worth considering is the role of peers in student composition. Kimberly Lenters and Kimberley Grant explore how multimodal recording devices can transform peer feedback within the writer’s workshop in “Feedback Loops: Assembling Student Editors, Stories, and Devices for Multimodal Peer Feedback.” In this article, they report on their study of a fifth-grade classroom made up primarily of students who spoke English as an additional language. In the final article, “Revaluing Readers: Learning from Zachary,” Yetta Goodman, Prisca Martens, and Alan Flurkey present a case study in which a young child came to revalue reading and himself through the use of retrospective miscue analysis. Through this work with Zachary, they illustrate how young readers can develop reading strategies and use textual cues to support meaning making.

In the Research and Policy department, “Calling for Responsability in Our Classrooms,” Maureen Boyd discusses the importance of teacher talk repertoires that cultivate deep understanding. Readers will find helpful her transcripts of classroom talk that illustrate three response-able teacher talk practices: contingency, inter-animation of student ideas, and exploratory talk. In the professional books department, Diane DeFord, Janie Goodman, Tasha Laman, and Victoria Oglan review four books that can help teachers interested in improving the relevance of their instruction and assessment. In the children’s book department, Jonda McNair, Deanna Day, Karla Möller, and Angie Zapata review a variety of titles that cross genres. Every reader, regardless of grade level, will find something of interest. We conclude this issue with a conversation between children’s author Deborah Wiles and Brian Williams, Director of the Alonzo A. Crim Center for Excellence in Urban Education. In their lively conversation, titled “On Stories and Revolutions,” they discuss the civil rights movement in literature for young readers, affordances of multigenre books, and more. Through this conversation, they remind us of the fundamental nature to societal change of taking time to listen to each other’s stories.

Taken together, this issue of Language Arts drives home the importance of the power of kid-watching—a term previously made relevant by one of this issue’s authors (Goodman, 1989). It means that careful listening and observing of our...
students as they talk, draw, write, and read can provide important information to improve teaching and learning. We hope these rich examples will inspire you, as they have inspired us, to remember how our students can astonish us when we give them the space to do so and take up the observational stance to see it.

References

Edwyna Wheadon Postgraduate Training Scholarship for Public School Teachers

English/language arts teachers working in public educational institutions are eligible to apply for an Edwyna Wheadon Postgraduate Training Scholarship. This $500 award supports postgraduate training to enhance teaching skills and/or career development in teaching. To qualify, the recipient’s degree or nondegree course must be provided by an accredited, degree-granting public or private two-year junior or community college, four-year college or university, or graduate or professional school. Recipients must be NCTE members at the time of award. The application deadline is January 31. For more information, see http://www.ncte.org/second/awards/wheadon.

2016 David H. Russell Award Call for Nominations

NCTE is now accepting nominations for the David H. Russell Award for Distinguished Research in the Teaching of English. This award recognizes published research in language, literature, rhetoric, teaching procedures, or cognitive processes that may sharpen the teaching or the content of English at any level. Any work or works of scholarship or research in language, literature, rhetoric, or pedagogy and learning published during the past five years are eligible. Works nominated for the David H. Russell Award should be exemplary instances of the genre, address broad research questions, contain material that is accessibly reported, and reflect a project that stands the test of time. Normally, anthologies are not considered. Reports of doctoral studies, while not precluded from consideration for the Russell Award, are typically considered as part of NCTE’s separate Promising Researcher program. Works nominated for the award must be available in the English language.

To nominate a study for consideration, please email the following information to ksearsmith@ncte.org: your name, your phone, your email; author, title, publisher, date of publication, and one paragraph indicating your reasons for nominating the work. If you have the four copies of the publication needed for distribution to the Selection Committee, please send them to the postal address below. (If not, we will request them from the publisher.) Send nominations and materials by March 1, 2016, to: David H. Russell Award, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1010, Attn: Kelly Searsmith.