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Editors’ Introduction

All in the Details

Mark Dressman
Sarah McCarthey
Paul Prior
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

What makes a “memorable” research article? Is it the originality of the topic, or the framing of its research questions? Perhaps it is the care of its design and analysis, or the cogency with which findings are presented, or the extent to which its implications challenge others to rethink their own perspectives? Or is it perhaps a great title—“Grand Conversations” (Eeds & Wells, 1989); “Matthew Effects” (Stanovich, 1986); “Inventing the University” (Bartholomae, 1985)—that seals in readers’ minds a basic concept that in turn structures discourse within a field over many years?

The four articles offered in this issue share many of these qualities, but we would argue that their memorability—and their value—lies principally in the extensive detail with which their findings are presented. In “English Teacher Candidates Developing Dialogically Organized Instructional Practices,” Samantha Caughlan, Mary M. Juzwik, Carlin Borsheim-Black, Sean Kelly, and Jodene Goldenring Fine take up the issue of how to educate future English teachers to become more dialogic—that is, how to shift their instructional practices from teacher-dominated conversation within the classroom to practices in which students talk more among themselves and initiate more conversations with their teacher. Their approach involved a comprehensive and complex intervention in which teacher candidates learned explicitly about the value of dialogic modes (or “tools,” in the study’s Vygotskian parlance), designed and implemented dialogic activities, and then monitored their teaching and received feedback through the use of video recording and analysis. Eighty-seven candidates participated in the study, which yielded hundreds of hours of recorded teaching events in school settings. A very fine-grained statistical analysis of these events showed that the teacher candidates engaged in far more dialogic activities with students in their classrooms than typical and that student-led activities produced higher levels of student participation around key disciplinary concepts than did teacher-led activities. Far from being “reductive,” the statistical analysis of data in this study provides a very complex and nuanced picture of the conditions and outcomes of dialogic modes of instruction.
A very different but no less engaging or complex use of Vygotskian theory is provided by a single-case study of an adolescent writer within a British setting in “The Mediation of Learning in the Zone of Proximal Development through a Co-constructed Writing Activity” by Ian Thompson. In this study, John, an adolescent in a classroom of students with a history of struggle with literacy tasks, agrees to write a story of his choosing collaboratively with his tutor (Thompson), and in so doing to “model” the writing process for the rest of the class. The complexity and detail of this study come through two sources, Thompson’s extensive and engaging discussion of the application of Vygotskian principles within the writing process, and his detailed account of writing a horror story with John as a “more capable other,” which subsequently served as a model for the writing process of the class. The result is a very close reading and application of Vygotskian theory to the teaching of process writing in cases where students struggle to write at all—perhaps one of the very closest applications of Vygotskian theory in the literature, and a study that will raise many questions about process-oriented writing instruction in readers’ minds.

A third article presents some challenging lessons about the complex effects of top-down reform movements on the teaching of early reading on teachers’ practices. In “Portraits of Practice: A Cross-Case Analysis of Two First-Grade Teachers and Their Grouping Practices,” Beth Maloch, Jo Worthy, Angela Hampton, Michelle Jordan, Holly Hungerford-Kresser, and Peggy Semingson provide contrasting portraits of two first-grade teachers who placed their students in “reading groups” and implemented “guided reading” in their classrooms, with differing results. Maloch et al. situate their accounts of these two teachers’ practices in the history of early reading instruction, noting that neither “grouping” nor “guided reading” are recent developments. The complexity of their analysis lies in (1) a point they make in their review of the literature, namely that although these practices are common, their meanings and implementation vary widely from teacher to teacher according to teachers’ interpretations of how “policy” should be implemented in their classrooms, and in (2) their demonstration of this point through accounts of how these teachers organized and implemented reading instruction. Readers should be aware that these are not accounts of “best practice,” but rather accounts that provide a window on “typical practice” in school settings dominated by current reading policy both nationally and locally within the United States.

A more hopeful portrait of literacy instruction is presented in “Recruiting Languages and Lifeworlds for Border-Crossing Compositions,” by Allison Skerrett and Randy Bomer, who provide detailed portraits of two ninth-grade students that break many of the stereotypes about immigrant Mexican-American students in the United States today. In the study, Vanesa and Nina are ninth-graders who were born in Mexico and speak Spanish as their first language; however, in contrast to the image of “illegal immigrant” students struggling to fit within an English-dominant
setting, these students are described as “transnationals”—as students who regularly travel, either physically or virtually between the U.S. and Mexico, and who maintain dual (and sometimes merging) identities and language practices. Moreover, in contrast to the frequent portrait of American English teachers as unable to cope with or hostile to accommodating their students’ dual languages, Skerrett and Bomer provide the example of Molly, a White middle-class English and reading teacher who sees these students’ bilingualism and dual national identities as an asset to their literate development and seeks to build on these strengths through reading and writing assignments that encourage the students to become themselves.

As in the other articles in this issue, it is the detail and care with which data are presented that will engage readers’ imaginations and expand their understanding of the complexity of becoming fully literate today.

Finally, we are very pleased to announce the winner of the 2012 Purves Award, given to the article in the previous volume year of RTE with the greatest potential for impacting practice in the teaching of the English language arts. This year’s winner is “Children’s Text Development: Drawing, Pictures, and Writing” (RTE Vol. 46, No. 1, August 2011), by Mary Christianakis. This study focuses on the use of multimodal approaches to teaching literacy within an ethnically diverse fifth-grade classroom in the San Francisco Bay Area. The study is both theoretically and ethnographically complex, provides new insight into the relationship among older children between drawing and the acquisition of literacy, and offers critical practical insight for the development of literacy curriculum and instruction. We congratulate Dr. Christianakis for this award and are honored that she chose to submit this important work to RTE for publication. We also wish to express our deep gratitude to the committee of graduate students at the University of Illinois at Chicago, advised by Dr. Taffy Raphael—Michelle M. Shabaker, Steven Kushner, Michelle Nixon, and Melissa E. Tragos—for reading every article in the previous volume year and for the care and effort taken in their selection process.

REFERENCES

