Julie E. Wollman-Bonilla gave the following talk at the 2001 NCTE Conference in Baltimore upon receiving the Alan C. Purves Award, presented to the RTE article from the previous year's volume judged most likely to have an impact on the practice of others. Wollman-Bonilla used the occasion to reflect on ethical issues that are central to her work as an educational researcher. She argues that research ought to be practiced as a form of service that respects teachers and students and enables researchers to grow through a process of reflection. An ethic of care is thus central to her view of research, something that is suppressed in the current policy environment that puts research into practice to further agendas rather than improve the lives of teachers and students.

Let me begin by expressing my gratitude to Peter Smagorinsky and Michael Smith for the direction in which they have taken Research in the Teaching of English and for their meticulous care in crafting each issue into a reward for their readers. It is quite an honor to receive the Purves Award for an article selected from a journal where I find every article intellectually rich, challenging, and generative—educative in Deweyan terms (1938). I also wish to express thanks to the award committee, not only for their time spent reviewing the latest volume of RTE, but especially for pushing me to sort through my thoughts about how my research might impact practice. It is this vision of the usefulness and uses of research that I want to explore in my talk this evening—“Teaching science writing to first graders: Genre learning and recontextualization” (Wollman-Bonilla, 2000a) being but one example.

As I argue in “Science writing,” literacy is a process that simultaneously draws upon and (re)creates social resources for thinking and communication. Writing entails revoicing by appropriating and recontextualizing social forms and functions for text (Bakhtin, 1986; Bazerman, 1997, 1998; Martin, 1999). My writing of the article was certainly such a social activity. Like
the children whose science writing I explored, my composing was shaped by socio-historical discourse forms and the ideas of other researchers cited in the article. At the same time, like the children’s texts, the article also reflects my agency, as I redeployed established forms and ideas to try to reveal new insights (Martin, 1999).

Also like the children’s compositions, my writing was shaped by the socio-historical context in which I was working. One aspect of that context that was crucial to the resulting article is the very thoughtful feedback I received on my original draft from reviewers, especially from Michael and Peter. This feedback opened up new possibilities to me for revising the article to improve it considerably. So, in accepting this award I must share the honor with the editors and reviewers of RTE: What appears as my work was socially constructed.

There are aspects of “Science writing” that I am quite proud of, some of which grew out of the feedback I’ve mentioned. But, I would like to problematize the article as a text that has been recognized to have a potentially significant impact on educational practice. This brings me to my title “Does anybody really care?” which, incidentally, revoices the words of a popular song from my youth. I think we researchers may be far more adept at posing research questions than we are at asking ourselves this more fundamental question about our work and its impact on others personally and on educational practice in general.

I want to suggest that we consider framing research as a type of service, or social action, a theme I believe is congruous with the Purves Award and with Purves’s work and contribution to the field. But this is no simple suggestion in an academic world characterized by the separation of our work into neat categories: service to the profession and to our institutions is viewed as one thing and scholarship quite another. Moreover, framing research as service inevitably implies that certain research agendas and approaches to inquiry may be more ethical, more useful than others—more likely to have a positive impact on practice. If research is conceived as service, then who cares about research and what we as researchers care about (and are motivated by) as we do our work, is central to our scholarly endeavors. In this talk I will use “Science writing” as a touchstone to explore the notion of research as service by asking broad questions related to research’s potential usefulness.

Who Cares about Research?

To reframe its purpose in my terms, the Purves award is given for research that has the potential to serve the field of education. But who is included in that field? And who is served? It is something of a commonplace that most teachers care little for research despite the fact that most educational researchers believe themselves to be doing work that will improve classroom practice. (I’m not sure, however that they consider teachers their implied readers.) I acknowledge that I tread on delicate
territory here, but these stereotypes are well established enough and ring true enough for teacher educators to deserve exploration.

Teachers may see research as representing tidied-up experience, detached from the tangled realities of classroom life. Surely “Science writing” can be accused of this shortcoming. The classroom contexts are presented as neat, relatively simple, and consistent. Although I believe my portrayal is accurate as far as it goes, it fails to reflect the multiple, conflicting perspectives and activities that were, on any given day, reality in classrooms alive with first graders, their teachers, and often parent or senior citizen volunteers.

But we all know a text is but a snapshot—a representation of a limited piece of lived experience. So a research report’s failure to mirror a classroom context’s complexity does not fully explain what academics are wont to term “teachers’ resistance” to research and to using research to improve their practice. Indeed, as Richardson (1990) argued over ten years ago, teachers are not simply resistant or skeptical; rather, the “epistemologies of research and practice” are “quite different” (p. 10). Richardson’s study of teacher change based on research–based practice revealed that “Teachers’ considerations were much broader and more contextual than any of the [researchers’] theoretical orientations could account for” (p. 15). In this sense, research isn’t useful because its theoretical groundings and implications don’t capture the dynamic multiplicity of personalities, sociocultural backgrounds, personal and curricular issues, events, expectations, and external demands that are constantly at play in teachers’ minds.

Think about the implications: Teachers’ theories of action may be richer, more complex, and more reflective of intellectual tension than those of researchers! Maybe this complexity is what makes teachers’ work challenging and interesting enough to combat the lack of respect and low professional status they endure from much of the public.

Twenty years ago I was a theoretically impure and passionately pragmatic elementary teacher; I did not stop to run every single action carefully through my theoretical filter, though certainly that filter guided my planning and practice in a global way. I was too busy doing—helping, encouraging, facilitating, organizing, mediating, soothing, challenging, and so on. All of these behaviors involve a great deal of thought and analysis but a different type of thought and analysis, perhaps, than those in which researchers might engage in the same situation. As Richardson’s (1990) findings suggest, my philosophy was not an object of study but a means to action. Sure, I saw the potential value of research that truly explored the application of theory to practice and, concurrently, used explorations of practice to develop grounded theory. Eventually I did teacher–research in my own classroom (Wollman–Bonilla, 1989). But “Science writing” seems far more cerebral, far less practical than what concerned and energized me then. My intellect was deeply attentive and engaged, but it was awash
in the daily rhythms of the classroom, not in what may have seemed esoteric analysis of those rhythms.

From the time “Science writing” was published I have felt guilty of an orientation to which educators, like my more youthful self, might reply, “Who cares?” It seemed to me that as much as I enjoyed the theoretical and analytical challenge of preparing the article, this could be just an “ivory tower” intellectual game with language. After all, many of the terrific elementary teachers I know (those who are active in NCTE or the National Writing Project) have told me that analysis of science writing, or close attention to genres at all (other than personal narrative, fiction, and poetry), simply has not been a concern of theirs. Science writing is something they haven’t thought about and don’t easily connect to their priorities as literacy teachers.

Moreover, the article is so technical in its analysis it may be difficult to approach for anyone without a background in linguistics. I shared a near-final draft with one of my colleagues who teaches courses on teaching elementary science. This colleague had mentioned he was working with teachers on writing in science, so I told him about the article. After he tried to read the manuscript, this professionally-active teacher educator apologetically told me we’d need to meet so I could explain it to him. I wondered at the time if the article could have any impact on education if only those in my reference list had the background and interest to get through it!

Of course, teachers’ wariness of research may not grow from lack of interest, concern, or background needed to understand research reports. Their wariness may reflect their wisdom. A frequent complaint from the outstanding teachers I know is that they are not trusted as professionals. Instead, every few years a brand new research-proven program is foisted upon them by the local school board (and the old one forbidden), making it difficult for them to teach in ways they have refined through practice enhanced by ongoing professional education. When they protest the imposition of the tenth new program in the past 20 years, the answer comes back: “Research says.” Research even takes on a voice with which teachers must contend. Incidentally, when I first tried to type the word “voice” it came out “vice”! Maybe research becomes a vice in teachers’ eyes because too often it serves to overregulate and even corrupt their work rather than helping them improve it (Lagemann, 2000; Thiessen, 2000).

At the same time, however, many teachers are conditioned (by their education, their working conditions, and the public perception that they are mindless automatons needing only to be told the one right way) to think that teaching is simply about adopting an expert’s method or faithfully executing lesson plans from a teacher’s manual. The “Science writing” article is related to my recent book that looks much more broadly at the Family Message Journals in which the science writing took place (Wollman-Bonilla, 2000b). When I initially talked to the first-grade teachers about writing a book on
their work in relation to the journals, they told me that was a great idea. They envisioned a spiral bound, large-print, large-margin text. This book, one of them explained, would suggest a message topic for each school day—a topic that had worked for these two teachers—so that other teachers could simply assign the topic *du jour.*

I was speechless. These teachers did not themselves design topics that way—they let them grow out of the context of each day’s work and of the inevitable unexpected and serendipitous events (e.g., snowstorms, classroom visitors) that occurred on some days. The topics they assigned were highly contextualized to match the themes under study and the specific classroom activities that were a part of their teacher-designed curriculum. In short, this idea was offered by two teachers who are thoughtful and innovative and who shun the sort of shortcut they had proposed. But clearly they thought such a shortcut would be useful to others. “Science writing” seems less and less relevant to practice—there’s no recipe for success here. That’s one of those things I like about the article, but does anybody really care about recommendations for practice that are not unequivocal? And are we really serving teachers if we don’t follow their suggestions for our work?

Then too, I am well aware that unlike the first grade teachers I described, many teachers struggle with a dearth of good instructional resources, and an equally acute lack of administrative support for their work and their professional and personal development. No wonder a recipe book seems tempting—why create and assess new, uniquely context-sensitive approaches when such work is neither recognized nor appreciated, and teachers may even be chastised for doing it?

In addition, I can’t overlook the burgeoning standards-driven pressure to show results of a certain type and fast. It seems inevitable that teachers will feel betrayed when researchers, who seem ignorant of the stresses of classroom life, proclaim with authority (sometimes through policy makers) what should be happening in schools, what the outcomes should be, and how teachers will be held accountable for their work.

This realization leads me to a related reason that I question whether “Science writing” can have an impact. Science writing is generally not included on the state and national essay writing tests—tools of accountability—that have a growing clutch on education, shaping what is taught and how. Why, then, should I expect anyone to care? Why would I think of such an article as serving teachers when it doesn’t aim to help them demonstrate what they need to show in order to survive professionally? These questions raise disturbing tensions for me about the work I do, because I do wish to be of service, but I can’t ethically serve the political deity of accountability. In fact, I wish to challenge the common view of accountability with my work, and I have the luxury of doing so, but many teachers do not.
Caring toward Uncaring Ends

I have explored why teachers might not care to let research affect their practice, but there are those policy makers and politicians who do use research to shape what happens in classrooms, often by mandate. The research literature and the popular media suggest that there are a growing number of U.S. schools where a limited, narrowly-conceived, or narrowly-interpreted set of research studies are molding practice in remarkably consistent ways. Seeing such tunnel-vision be mistaken for a wide-angle view, I am concerned that articles like “Science writing” may be misinterpreted, even abused, by those opportunistic scavengers who care about research only insofar as it can be used to promote their own ends. For example, the article might be used to further the neo-conservative agenda of transmitting select information to those elite students already primed to receive this narrow, Western intellectual heritage (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1988). Or its recommendations may be appropriated in ways that commodify students and literacy by those who view school as the training ground for workers who will support the nation’s economy (Goodman, 1995). Or it may be abused by those who wish to mandate a neo-traditional focus on basic skills. In our current political climate applications of research often result in de-professionalizing teachers and regulating their work in unprecedented ways, taking the challenge, meaning, purpose, and opportunity out of learning for students. Let me elaborate on how I imagine this appropriation might happen with “Science writing.”

One of the messages of “Science writing” that I consider important is that we must free ourselves from the grip of writing process orthodoxies. Concern with prevailing beliefs about writing instruction has been well-documented (e.g. Fleming, 1995; Lensmire, 1994; McCarthey, 1994; Reyes, 1992). In the article I suggest that elementary educators should guide children to write as writing is used to think, solve problems, and get things done in our world—to write as social practice. This is the only way to empower all children, regardless of sociocultural and linguistic background, to use writing to participate in society and to assure they have the linguistic-cultural capital to generate new genres and, more broadly, to fashion less oppressive social structures. To put this another way, we must get past the primacy of the personal, so privileged in writing process approaches, and connect the personal to the public, to what is socially meaningful and purposeful, if we are to give children genuine voice and agency as writers.

The article describes educators who teach children to appropriate social resources of literacy but who also welcome children’s reworking of socio-historical forms and functions for writing. In short, the example of the first-grade classrooms shows that children may be invited to join in using conventions long before many would think they were ready while at the same time they are taught the flexibility, power, and agency of hybridity. These
children are learning to be scientists—to do the writing scientists do—but within a context that includes an authentic audience (outside the classroom) and that resists the rigidity often considered inherent in the teaching of genres. In this context genre is truly conceived as social action, not formulaic plan.

Still, I fear that the article might be read, or re-interpreted, as a call for fill-in-the-blank genre worksheets, to be turned in to the teacher as sole audience, or for outcomes-based training in science writing skills deemed valuable by business. I can think of many examples of such misinterpretation where consumers have used a researcher’s work to promote a stance that the researcher clearly does not aim to advance.

Perhaps the most prominent example of research results and perspectives being intentionally twisted to make points the researcher never intended can be found on the battlefield of the reading wars. Another example, particularly relevant here because it relates to the theme of research as social action, is Delpit’s work (1986, 1988). Her work, along with that of others, has demonstrated that providing children from nonmainstream backgrounds with access to the language of power in society may involve direct instruction that process-focused educators are uncomfortable with. She was among the first to help us see that many practices considered state-of-the-art are geared toward children who already have both access to mainstream ways of communicating and a strong sense of entitlement about their educational and life opportunities. In short, these practices may work for only a subset of privileged children and may limit many others’ opportunities to learn.

Yet some have portrayed Delpit’s (1986, 1988) research as an argument for a steady diet of isolated, meaningless rote skills. This misinterpretation occurs despite Delpit’s unequivocal call for context-rich, meaningful, direct instruction that is sensitive to the individual learner’s needs and intended to result in critical literacy, not a mind numbed by stifling nonsense drill. Delpit argues that children must learn to play the game of power without necessarily buying into it. If they can’t play, they can’t participate in changing the rules. And if no one makes the rules evident and shows how they are enacted, but instead a child simply recites and rehearses rules out of the context of the game, that child will never learn to play. This belief is similar to my argument in “Science writing” that we must teach genres systematically in order to empower learners to enter the game, but that we must also teach with openness to flexibility and change that reflect the writer’s audience, context, and agency.

Delpit’s (1986, 1988) work has been turned on its head to support practices that, rather than guide children into the game, ensure that they remain bench-warmers on the sidelines. Expected to participate only in basic drills during practice, they never make it onto the field to try using the skills they have mastered simply as skills, not as moves in a larger game. When Delpit’s research is cited to support
such a stance, the cruel politics of status quo maintenance is shrouded by an apparent concern with skilling all children, bolstered by a profoundly limited view of skill.

Let me offer another example of misinterpretation related even more closely to the “Science writing” article. In the Family Message Journals where the children’s science writing took place, families wrote replies to their first-graders’ daily messages. One of the strengths of this activity, in my view, was families’ willingness to reply (thanks to the teachers’ encouragement) even when they lacked skill in written English. Moreover, those families with less knowledge of English wrote some of the most informative, creative replies—replies that were highly supportive of their children’s efforts and their learning—as I have discussed in a more recent article (Wollman-Bonilla, 2001). But when educators look at my examples of family replies, there are always some who react: “This is terrible. Look at all these spelling and grammar and punctuation errors families made! This is bad for the children.” Not only does this response fail to consider the actual impact of the replies on the students, it also fails to value what the families bring, along with their errors, to the process of literacy and content-area learning. My celebration of the families’ writing is used to blame families for being imperfect and “bad” for their children, without evidence of any negative effects. This blame established, it is easy to advance the notion that families may be responsible for children’s difficulties in school and that it may be appropriate to hold lower expectations for children from socioculturally or linguistically non-mainstream families.

When those who care about research care only insofar as it can be used, or abused, to serve their own political futures, their own oppressive ideologies, and their own social dominance, the result (political rhetoric about “all children” notwithstanding) is to make the academically rich richer and drain the potential value of education for the poor. Moreover, these fiscal images point to yet another group of research abusers whose views are particularly insidious because they are genuinely grounded in concern for all students’ access to opportunity and because they inadvertently support the functionalist perspective on school as the training ground for business. These neo-liberal reformers appear champions of the less-privileged, but their interpretations of research reveal a belief that the value of education is tantamount to its ability to help students secure high-paying jobs. Underlying this belief is the unquestioned assumption that all students seek, or must learn to seek access to the “desirable” jobs and material goods these reformers enjoy. Using research to help teach or reinforce materialism severely circumscribes the non-material benefits that can be gained from education and teaches that capitalist striving is the way to improve society. Moreover, such a perspective is inherently dishonest because it fails to recognize our social structures’ circular requirement that students bring pre-existing cultural capital to situations in
order access opportunities to learn what is needed to get “good” jobs.

The possibility of multiple forms of abuse is a deeply troubling aspect of placing research findings in the public domain. Research can be dangerous to students and teachers. I trust the potential influence the Purves Award committee had in mind for “Science writing” was a more positive one. But who can control that influence?

Caring that Reduces Research Findings to Dogma

Not only is research opportunistically embraced and facilely reinterpreted when it is useful to policy makers or politicians who may not trust teachers and children, or who approach them with patronizing good intentions; even when educators care about research and its classroom application, they may distort research findings as they attempt to enact them, resulting in what Dewey would call miseducative experiences (1938). At a recent AERA convention, Scardamalia (2000) argued that, in the process of translation from research report to classroom practice, reductionist tendencies tend to creep in. These simplifying tendencies create what she aptly called “lethal mutations.” It is common, she suggested, for a research-based approach to be enacted in a way that treats research-supported strategies as rigid prescriptions without attention to the underlying principles implying flexibility in application.

The result is lethal mutations. For example, “Science writing” might find itself translated into the classroom requirement that all first-grade teachers will teach the conventional text structures and grammar of all science genres as formulas (something the teachers I describe did not do) or that all first-grade teachers will assign science writing topics that match those in the article since they are research-proven. The suggestion, mentioned earlier, of a topic-per-day manual is a good example of a lethal mutation. Such reductionism is a natural force, although the article in no way suggests that there is a context-independent, objective, single right way to teach science writing unrelated to individual teachers’ and children’s purposes.

Eagerly searching for ways to help students progress, teachers can easily and with the best intentions misplace their focus on following a recommended strategy as dogma, even when its implementation conflicts with their long-term goals and their knowledge of their particular students. But isn’t this devotion to the answer a function of how research is published? A text, no matter how tentative its conclusions and how full-fleshed its limitations section, enjoys a form of authority, especially when it appears in a respected, peer-reviewed journal such as RTE. This authority, welcome or not, creates a tremendous responsibility for researchers to think, with care, about the students and teachers who may be profoundly affected, personally and professionally, by research reports.

What Do Researchers Care About?

Noddings (1986) suggests that we must ask ourselves, “Who will be affected by
our research and how?”, and further, will our research contribute to “the development of good persons” (p. 499) and “maintain a caring community” (p. 506)? I think it’s safe to say we don’t often ask ourselves such questions. And in our doctoral programs, where we socialize students into the research culture, we don’t teach such questioning as a central step in the research process.

We may even feel uncomfortable with such questions, yet all work in education inevitably reflects our values and our goals for society. And earlier I posited that one of the goals we commonly hold is to move classroom practice closer to our individual visions of the ideal. Thus, as researchers we are enmeshed in political and ethical issues. Even though we cannot control how it is used, because research is used by politicians, policy makers, and educators, I think we must consciously consider how we design research projects and how we represent our participants on the basis of a vision of an equitable, just, and caring society. This vision can shape not only the ends of our work but also how we engage in doing research.

Noddings (1986) asserts that rather than make teachers, students, and families the objects of our research, we ought to select research problems “that interest and concern . . . students and teachers” as well as researchers. I tried, in “Science writing,” to follow the teachers’ and children’s lead—describing what they did—but also illuminating their practice by looking at it through revealing theoretical lenses. I tried to understand why the teachers did not simply have children keep journals about their science experiments but instead encouraged and taught them to write using the language of science. However, although this was a naturalistic study, I chose the project. As enthusiastic as they were about the Family Message Journals and my research, the teachers, families, and children had not previously indicated that they were interested in learning more about how and why the journals worked. It was my interest that led the way.

In my latest work I have tried to follow more closely Nodding’s (1986) principles—letting a research project sprout from teachers’ questions about state-imposed essay tests involving persuasive writing and co-designing the project with the teachers involved. I think when teachers are respected as equals throughout the inquiry process, research is not only more just and caring, it is also more likely to impact practice positively.

However, the idea that I must use my influence as a researcher to serve others and their goals is a relatively new realization for me. I have a growing appreciation for my responsibility to value and help others value the work (and the questions) of teachers, children, and families. I cannot look back to 1989 and say that my dissertation research was ethical by the standards I’ve just laid out. I went into a magnet school, intending to document what a highly-respected classroom teacher did well. However, things were not going well for the poorest students of color in his classroom. Their behaviors seemed to be misunderstood and they were
getting poor quality instruction in my view. So I wrote about that. And my completed dissertation was judged to be of the highest quality.

I did not focus on the teacher’s dilemma in trying to meet these students’ needs. That insight came in an article published four years later in RTE (Wollman-Bonilla, 1994). Rather, I felt my power as an investigator uncovering wrongs, and I asserted that power in an authoritative and self-righteous way. Of course, I was not caught up in the day-to-day stress of addressing the needs of the child who came to school in freezing weather with not even a light coat, or the child who was placed in a foster home the night before, or the one who had a nervous breakdown halfway through sixth grade and was institutionalized, or the one who was the only member of her family who spoke English, or the one whose neighborhood was so violent it was likely he would not live to enter seventh grade. Those of you who work in urban schools know these realities.

I did not have to work with these needy children as I simultaneously addressed the needs of upper-middle class children whose professional parents were committed to public education and had carefully chosen this magnet school. Their children wore brand new winter coats, owned books to bring to school for free reading, and felt entitled to learn and excel. Some of the children in this classroom—poor and privileged—far exceeded the materials available in the school; they needed special teacher-designed challenges to keep them interested. How would I have taught the sixth grader who could not read at all and did not know what college was alongside the one who seemed nearly ready for college at age eleven? I barely gave these practical issues a passing thought—I focused on doing my study. And my study was not about how the teacher made such a situation work as best he could.

Since that time, I have vowed never again to gain a teacher’s trust (I’m not sure how much trust I actually gained—the teacher was smart) only to reveal some of his worst and most anguished moments as a professional. Now my goal is to truly work with not around teachers and children to understand their perspectives and thought processes—to do, as Noddings (1986) says, research for teaching, not against teaching. I believe one way to do this that may impact practice in positive ways is to describe what teachers are doing well, how they do it, and what the results are for children. Doing so does not mean avoiding the reality of classroom practices that may not work, or that seem problematic, or that could be improved. But it means confronting these issues non-judgmentally and with openness to understanding teachers’ and children’s thinking. And it does not mean succumbing to the highly seductive call of reductionism, making work in classrooms appear neat, easy and foolproof, if you just do it right.

In an article on evaluating bilingual education programs, Cziko (1992) argues that research can never tell conclusively what will work in all situations for all students, but it can provide illustrative cases—examples of what
works. I think he is on to a powerful idea when he argues for a focus not on convincing readers of generalizability but rather on possibilities presented by successful cases. He suggests that we view research as a way to see what is possible and, ultimately, desirable.

In short, researchers trying to improve education have a responsibility to describe what is working and to do so not as template but as grist for the mill of reflection and for thoughtful adaptation and modification to situated practice. This is how I would like to think of “Science writing” as having an impact. It provides an example of the work of two teachers who create a context that invites hybridity, allowing for flexible appropriation of genres by students writing for an authentic audience, affording children agency to draw on multiple resources to act socially through writing. And it celebrates how even very young writers can be successfully guided into socially-valued discourse and can take that discourse and run with it. I hope this example spurs teachers and teacher-educators to reflect on what works in writing instruction.

Of course, a focus on cases that work entails defining what works and embracing the inevitable doubt and uncertainty about what works. Producing such definitions is no small task, especially if we begin to define what works not only from our perspectives as researchers or policy makers but from the perspectives of the participants in our studies. Policy makers and politicians want better test scores, but perhaps understanding why that isn’t the sole or primary goal of our best teachers and what their goals are can enlighten policy.

I hope “Science writing” reflects my desire to understand what teachers and children are thinking and doing and how and why it works. More importantly, I hope it conveys my desire to help teachers reflect on and look anew at their work. I know this fresh vision did occur because, after the first-grade teachers involved in the study had read the related book and the article, one of them shared their common reactions with me. She said, “You know, we learned a lot about what we do from reading what you wrote. I never thought so much about all that I was doing, or why, or exactly what the kids gained from it. But when I read what you wrote I said to myself, ‘Yes, that is what we do, and it’s pretty good, and it makes me think about how it could be even better.’” This comment was the most rewarding reaction I have gotten to the study until now. The Purves Award means a lot to me because it suggests that beyond serving these two teachers, my work may also encourage others to think about how their teaching of writing “could be even better.”

Research as Social Action
Lest I appear to envision a simple solution to creating a better, more equitable educational system, I acknowledge that schools face multiple obstacles in producing successful models for educators to reflect upon. It is a painful reality for committed teachers, eager to make children’s lives better,
that good education is about much more than education. Our system of schooling mirrors and serves to reproduce larger social problems, one of which is the insidious attack of our society on its youth, especially poor children, children of color, and children from nonmainstream cultural and linguistic backgrounds. It is appalling that we do not care enough about all of our children to disrupt the inequitable, violent, and callous social milieu in which they grow up. I do not deny that schools and their teachers may (and often do) play a central role in sustaining if not creating these problems.

But social problems bigger than any school system impact how and whether research-based exemplary cases be adapted in any setting. For example, very basic issues of school funding and of access to nutrition, health care, and other social services shape what happens in the classroom and can make it very difficult for even the best teachers and most committed families to support children’s literacy growth in exemplary ways. A migrant-worker family or a homeless family may own no books, have no address or driver’s license to secure a public library card, and have no energy left after days of working sun up to sun down or after days of standing in lines and filing endless, demeaning paperwork to secure even the most minimal services to meet the barest needs. There simply may be no hope or will left to read to children, help with homework, or check that it’s done. And it is likely, in light of school funding patterns in this country, that the schools these children attend will lack the resources to provide what the families wish to provide but cannot.

Still, we must not assume that poor or nonmainstream families can’t support their children’s education. We need only look at the stories of strength and fierce determination told by Bray (1998) in her memoir Unafraid of the Dark, or by Kozol (1995) in Amazing Grace, or by Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) in Growing Up Literate, or by Coles (1993) in The Call of Service. These books contain true stories of desperately poor, racially and socioeconomically oppressed families, some racked by severe physical abuse and addiction, that nevertheless support their children’s education in every possible way. These texts represent research as social action by providing a witness to what is widely ignored, to what might be, and to the trust families place in the value of education (Coles, 1993). As researchers we must honor this trust by taking responsibility for helping to make education valuable.

Where does this leave “Science writing?” The article doesn’t directly address these social issues (and the teachers and children are all more privileged than those we meet in the books just mentioned), and so it falls short of my ideal of research as social action. I hope, however, that my emphasis on providing access to the discourses of power, through explicit attention to these discourses, can make some small difference. When all children have the tools needed to participate in and critique privileged social
forms and structures, perhaps they can help to erode our society’s self-righteous oppression of the less-privileged.

Doing Research as Service: Enacting Caring

In closing, I’ll try to summarize my vision of research that could positively impact practice and suggest how we might work toward that vision. In her book *The Shelter of Each Other*, Pipher (1996) argues that our society would be much healthier if the morality of our work and not its economic and professional rewards were our first concern. She suggests that as young adults enter the world of full-time work, they consider making a pledge: “I won’t do work that hurts children” (p. 266). I believe that researchers, too, should make this pledge and should reflect carefully on the potential for our work to be hurtful and harmful in ways that human participants committees do not attend to. So should those whose work it is to create research-based policy and those who apply theory to practice in classrooms daily.

Working with teachers and children and families to do research that honors who they are as people and highlights what they believe works can help us achieve research as praxis, to use Freire’s (1993) term. Research as praxis means that theory and practice, action and deliberate reflection, meet in a dialogical relationship in the process of carrying out any inquiry, not just in the research report. Such research is not only grounded in, but is also intricately intertwined with practice, with teachers’ work and thinking. When research reveals (and respects) the theoretical within the practical and the practical within the theoretical, it may no longer seem irrelevant or disrespectful to practitioners. It is also less likely to reflect lethal mutations in application because its practical implications will be firmly and inextrically tethered to grounded theoretical anchors and will entail deliberate reflection. It will not be imposed on school people but engaged in with and for participants. It will not use classrooms, teachers, children, and families as spaces to do research but, I believe, it will reflect researchers’ caring for and openness to all connected to and impacted by their work. It may, therefore, represent research as service. By participating in such service, researchers may grow through reflecting intellectually and emotionally on what it means to serve and how such service shapes our experiences, understandings, and professional goals, allowing novel insights to emerge from our research.

The goal of praxis for Freire (1993) is to transform an oppressive society. With research as praxis we may have some hope of transforming education and through it our society because society is what we are daily recreating as teachers and researchers. Rather than helping to reproduce social problems that classrooms mirror, research may serve the goal of slowly overcoming these problems to achieve academic and social equity, true community, and a heightened sense of personal and social responsibility for researcher producers, participants, and consumers. Do we care?
Author Note

Please direct correspondence to Julie E. Wollman-Bonilla, Associate Professor and Assistant Chair, Department of Elementary Education, Horace Mann 205, 600 Mount Pleasant Ave., Rhode Island College, Providence RI, 02908. E-Mail: jwollman@ric.edu.

References


---

**Symposium on Second Language Writing**

The Third Symposium on Second Language Writing will be held on October 11-12, 2002 at Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana. This year’s symposium, entitled “Constructing Knowledge: Approaches to Inquiry in Second Language Writing,” will feature 16 scholars who will explore various ways in which knowledge is constructed, transformed, disseminated, and negotiated in the field of second language writing. Presenters will include Dwight Atkinson, Linda Lonon Blanton, Colleen Brice, Christine Pearson Casanave, Dana Ferris, John Flowerdew, Richard Haswell, Sarah Hudelson, Ken Hyland, Xiaoming Li, Rosa Manchon, Paul Kei Matsuda, Susan Parks, Miyuki Sasaki, Tony Silva, and Bob Weissberg. For more information, please visit: [http://icdweb.cc.purdue.edu/~silvat/symposium/2002/](http://icdweb.cc.purdue.edu/~silvat/symposium/2002/).