Editorial Introduction

by Gordon Wells

In an age when the powers that be value only "reliable, replicable research", designed to provide panaceas for our supposed failing schools, it is important to recognise the very different assumptions about effective learning and teaching that underlie practitioner research. As every teacher knows, no two classes are ever the same, even within the same school, and each requires the teacher to co-construct, with and for the students in the class, the ways in which the prescribed curriculum will be approached. This is essential if the teaching is to be responsive to the cultural values, experiences and expectations of the particular members of the class. So, if classes in the same school are not homogeneous, the situation across states and nations is inevitably even more diverse. Under these conditions, it is clear that there can be no panaceas: no "method" is universally the "best".

The particular value of practitioner research, therefore, is that it does not attempt to prescribe best practice but, instead, seeks to achieve and share insights about particular classrooms, lessons, or approaches, as seen from the practitioner's perspective. The message is, thus, not "this is a universally successful method; now implement it" but, rather, "this is what I found; perhaps it will offer a helpful way to look at what is happening in other settings." And, in taking this stance, it assumes that teachers are professionals who realise that improvements come from collaborative attempts to better understand the complexity of learning and teaching, rather than treating them as operatives who simply implement the plans of distant "experts", who know nothing about the particular situations in which they work.

Networks exists to promote this collaborative dialogue among practioner researchers. Now more than ever, it is crucial to to keep the dialogue going and to increase the membership of the community in which it takes place. Many of us hope - and even believe - that, before long, the current emphases on homogenization, standardized testing and payment by test results will be recognized to have been a serious mistake - for which a whole generation of students will have paid in terms of restricted learning opportunities, suppression of individual talents and interests, and a lack of critical and open-ended investigation of issues of global as well as local importance. When that day of reckoning comes, it is crucial that there be a cadre of reflective practioners and teacher researchers who can take the lead in exploring and charting possible new and more effective ways of motivating and supporting students' learning and creative problem posing and solving. As Dewey pointed out a century ago, the health of a democracy depends on the active, informed and critical participation of all its members; and this can only happen if schooling provides an apprenticeship into such practices through the ways in which it is enacted.

I am taking this opportunity to express my beliefs as clearly as possible because this is the last issue of *Networks* that I shall be editing. After eight years, I feel it is time to hand over the editorship to someone younger and more directly involved in practitioner research than I am now able to be. However, the new editor is no stranger to Networks. Cathy Compton Lilley has contributed both articles and book reviews to previous issues and, from the beginning, has been a key member of the panel that is responsible for arranging to review and provide feedback on all manuscripts submitted to the journal. I am sure she will be an excellent editor, who will seek

new ways to increase the number of contributors as well as of readers. I ask you to give her your strong support.

The Current Issue

As the result of a number of problems, this issue has been a long time in coming. But, as usual, it contains a collection of stimulating articles that each, in its way, reports an attempt to bring about improvement in the quality of learning in a particular setting. Providing a common thread across these articles is the issue of motivation, which is both a prerequisite for, and an outcome of, the kinds of learning that aim for understanding and are the basis for effective and responsible action.

The first article, by Ashley Shipp and Penny Beed, explores the value of wordless picture books in helping emergent writers to compose oral stories as a means to coming to understand the genre of written narrative. Over three sessions, the first author worked with a quiet first grader, scaffolding his storying, and recording their interaction for later analysis. As the authors report, there was a dramatic improvement in the student's ability to construct and tell a story. Equally importantly, the authors learned a great deal about the potential of this approach for supporting children's emergent interest in literacy.

Lauree Buus is concerned with a later stage in literacy at which, while they can decode to speech without error, some children seem to understand very little of the meaning of what they read. In this context, Buus suspected that these children might be having problems of memory and she introduced reading response journals as a possible way of getting them to give more attention to comprehending what they read. After using the journals for nine weeks, Buus found that those children who were keen to participate showed signs of increased comprehension. However, there were some who were still not interested and, as a result, made no progress, thus raising a problem for further research.

As the title announces, the article by Dave Burghardt and Christine Krowles is concerned with an attempt to enrich fifth grade students' mathematical thinking by engaging them in designing a chair, in the course of which, working in pairs, they would have to solve a variety of geometric problems. As they report, the innovation was very successful: not only did the students significantly increase their test scores, but they also showed a dramatic improvement in their attitude to mathematics.

Turning to enhancing interest in science, Todd Campbell and Brianna Worst carried out a study with preservice elementary teachers in which they used peer teaching to explore approaches to inquiry-oriented science learning and teaching. Their article reports on Worst's presentation of a forensic science project involving issues around fingerprints and, after discussion, two alternative ways of involving students more deeply in inquiry.

Robin Morelock addresses one of the critical problems facing teachers whenever an activity involves group work: How to form groups that will work together productively. While not claiming to have the "correct" answer, Morelock reports the results of a systematic comparison

between assigning students to pairs and allowing them to choose their own partners and concludes that both can be satisfactory.

The final article, by Kevin Bailey and Hector Rios, reports Bailey's attempt to reduce the occurrence of bullying among eighth grade students through a small-scale intervention. While the results were far from conclusive, they were sufficiently encouraging to merit further elaboration of the approach adopted.

This issue ends with a review of *Imagination and Literacy* by Karen Gallas, a most highly respected teacher researcher.