

# THERE'S ROOM FOR ME HERE

Literacy Workshop in the  
Middle School

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# In Pursuit of Hopefulness

*You know, Giono said to me, there are also times in life when a person has to rush off in pursuit of hopefulness.*

Norma L. Goodrich, afterword to *The Man Who Planted Trees*

## \*\*\* Partnerships for Learning

I met Kyle Gonzalez in 1992. It was my first year of teaching at the University of Central Florida, and Kyle was an undergraduate there. I was then the only English education professor, so Kyle took several classes with me. With each subsequent class, I became more impressed with Kyle's focus on the students who would be on the receiving end of our ideas and plans. Her quiet ways and intense interest in the whys of education garnered my respect from the beginning.

In 1993, during the fall term of Kyle's final undergraduate year, I began talking with Orange County administrators about the increasing number of public middle school students who were unable or unwilling to read. These administrators read my dissertation (published in 1995 as *It's Never Too Late*), which chronicled my work with secondary students at risk in terms of literacy, and together we began to plan the Orange County Literacy Project. In the fall of 1994 the county would institute special classes attempting to replicate and modify for middle schools the classroom practices I had written about. The one change was the addition of a computer software program created by Vanderbilt University professors.

By the summer of 1994, three middle schools had been chosen to pilot the Literacy Project and two of the three teachers who would conduct the newly created classes had been hired. However, the principal of the third school called and asked me to recommend someone to teach these classes in his school. He wanted someone who had recently graduated from the English education program in which I was teaching, so that

the philosophy and methodology would remain consistent. Kyle had just graduated in May and had begun her master's program immediately. She was the first person who came to my mind.

I had talked with Kyle often during her senior internship and watched her work with at-risk students in the Orlando Shakespeare Festival's Young Company. I was always struck by the high level of respect with which she treated students. In spite of the newness of her role as a teacher, she seemed to have a keen sense of responsibility for meeting students where they were. I knew that in spite of her lack of classroom experience, these characteristics would serve her well in dealing with students who were reading several years below grade level, failing almost all their courses, and spending a great deal of time in administrative offices because of discipline problems. Since I was a consultant with the project, I also knew that I would be working closely with Kyle to help her establish the literacy workshop in her classroom. And so, our collaborative research and writing began.

## \* \* \* Writing and Reading There's Room for Me Here

During the first year of the Literacy Project, I spent a great deal of time observing Kyle's classes, talking with her, and helping her adjust the practices that had been effective in my classes in order to meet the needs of her students. We kept journals, collected samples, and interviewed students as a way of furthering Kyle's teaching and learning. When Kyle's teaching life became too hectic for journal keeping, she started dictating into a handheld tape recorder as she drove to and from work (perhaps not the safest way to drive through downtown Orlando). She taped her classes, conferences with students, and students' reading so that we could discuss what was happening in her classroom.

This was a stressful time for Kyle, and I have often wondered whether I could have withstood such pressure during my first year of teaching. Kyle had taken on a job that would have intimidated many veteran teachers. Although her class sizes were small (fifteen to twenty students per class), she had only students who were previously unsuccessful in school. Pulling these students from their regular classes, putting them all together in one classroom, and requiring them to be in class for twice as long as other students created a unique set of dynamics. In addition, this was a new project for Orange County and its success or failure would influence whether the project would be expanded to other schools and classrooms. Kyle's classroom, therefore, received frequent visitors: county administrators, school board officials, Florida Department of Education personnel, teachers and administrators from other schools and counties, and me. All this during her first year of teaching in a program that had no specific curricular guidelines with students that others had written off. It is a tribute to Kyle that she survived.

The following year, Orange County expanded the Literacy Project to ten additional schools. I met with new teachers and enlisted Kyle to help them move from traditional classrooms to the literacy workshop. Speaking with these teachers helped Kyle think carefully about the decisions she made in her classroom and the impact those decisions had on students' learning.

At the beginning of Kyle's second year of teaching, Philippa Stratton visited Kyle's classroom and the idea for a book was born. My observations and our conferences that year took on a dual focus: helping Kyle continue to refine her practice and documenting the journey that Kyle and her students were taking. That year of focused research led to the actual writing of this book, which began in the spring of Kyle's second year of teaching and continued throughout her third.

So, whose voice will you hear as you read this book? We want you to hear both our voices, as well as those of the students who have been in Kyle's classes for the past three years. Like other writing partners, we struggled with how to make the reading of this book coherent and consistent without making the writing anonymous. In all honesty, we also had to deal with issues related to Kyle's intimidation as a new teacher thrust into writing with her professor and my issues related to writing about a classroom not my own. Fortunately, we were asked to coauthor a chapter for an edited book, *Meeting the Challenges: Stories from Today's Classrooms* (Barbieri and Tateishi 1996) and were able to work through some of these issues in the context of a smaller project. I highly recommend this sort of trial run to those anticipating writing a book together.

Here's the writing pattern that worked for us. Together, Kyle and I reflected on the notes we had taken from our research and decided what topics should be chapters in the book. Before we began writing each chapter, we talked about the important issues in the chapter. Then Kyle went home, freewrote about that topic within the context of her classroom, and pulled samples of student work to support what she had written. When she finished, she gave both the freewrite and the samples of student work to me.

For Chapters 3 through 10, while Kyle was freewriting, I wrote the introduction for that chapter. I found research that supports the concepts the chapter deals with and then placed Kyle's classroom within the larger picture of that research. In each of these introductory pieces, the "I" is me.

At the end of these introductions, I cue the reader that we are moving into Kyle's classroom. After that point, the "I" is Kyle. These classroom sections are the heart of the book—in them we have tried to create a rich and specific context. However, not all the things in these sections actually come from Kyle's freewrite. They are compilations of Kyle's freewrites and student samples as refined by my observations and interviews. In some cases I used entire pages of Kyle's freewrites with only minor changes; in other cases, I added information that I felt was necessary for

an accurate picture or moved material between chapters. Sometimes I added quotes or references, and sometimes I took out things that were too personal for public writing. There was no easy way to delineate which lines came from Kyle and which came from me without confusing us *and* our readers. In any case, after researching and writing together for almost three years now, we're not all that sure who said what anyway!

At the end of each of the chapters, we leave Kyle's classroom and reflect on what happened there. In those reflective pieces, the "I" once again is me.

Chapters 2, 11, and 12 veer from this pattern. In Chapter 2, I present a little necessary background. Chapter 11, "But What About...," is a list of questions. We compiled the list together, then Kyle wrote a response to each one. Later, I put them into categories and developed and edited them. So, although the "I" in those responses is me, we both contributed. I introduce Chapter 12, and then we each do our own reflections.

We feel this sandwich pattern is a realistic picture of the book: Kyle's freewrites are the meat and my introductions and reflections hold the chapters together. We hope that our writing is clear enough to achieve a larger goal: that you will be able take what we have learned from our teaching and researching and adapt it to your particular teaching context as you work with adolescents in your school.

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