

THERE'S ROOM FOR ME HERE

Literacy Workshop in the
Middle School



Janet Allen
Kyle Gonzalez

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For three years he had been planting trees in the wilderness. He had planted one hundred thousand. Of the hundred thousand, twenty thousand had sprouted. Of the twenty thousand he still expected to lose about half, to rodents or to the unpredictable designs of Providence. There remained ten thousand oak trees to grow where nothing had grown before

Jean Giono, *The Man Who Planted Trees*

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Middle School

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For Rick, who found a place for me—a home of peace, friendship, caring, and hope—especially every other Thursday!

For Troy, who continues to be my uncommon friend—my laughter—my place of dreams and adventures.

Janet

For my husband, Robbie Gonzalez, who has continued to believe that I can do anything I set my mind to, even when I don't believe I can. JKL, honey.

For my grandfather, Paul B. McNamara, who taught me about the joys of life and laughter.

Kyle

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Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
1 In Pursuit of Hopefulness	1
2 From “Hey, Crackhead!” to <i>The Lion King</i>	5
3 Connections Within and Beyond the Literacy Workshop	11
4 Reading as the Foundation for Literacy: Whole-Group Strategies	37
5 Can’t We Please Just Read? Independent Reading in the Literacy Workshop	60
6 Reading to Write and Writing to Read	83
7 A Gathering of Goals	104
8 Are You <i>Sure</i> Iced Tea Used to Be Hot?	117
9 It Makes a Difference to This One	134
10 Assessment and Record Keeping	153
11 But What About...	170
12 Finding the Keys, Opening the Locks	184
Appendix A: Forms	191
Appendix B: Resources	220
Appendix C: Suggested Titles for Shared Reading	223
Appendix D: Suggested Titles for Independent Reading	226
Professional References	231
Literary References	235
Index	241

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Kyle Gonzalez

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Janet Allen



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 neces-

sary 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.



From “Hey, Crackhead!” to *The Lion King*

Almost anything can become a learning experience if there is enough caring involved.

Mary MacCracken, Lovey

* * * Adolescence and the Literacy Workshop

Days spent with adolescents are challenging, tender, anxious, angry, loving, and exciting times for teachers. Unfortunately, in a middle-level classroom, all these emotions can be experienced in a ten-minute period, and no one who has spent a significant amount of time with middle school learners would ever accuse *anyone* of exaggeration. Each day with these young people moves our perception of normal a little further off-center. The older I get, however, the more I value that shifting ground adolescents are forced to tread. Adolescence is a unique time. Don't misunderstand me; I have no desire to return to that age. In fact, I seldom meet a reminiscing adult who yearns for his or her adolescence. There is good reason adolescents long to get out of that stage and adults don't want to return to it: it is a time filled with uncertainty and anxiety. Middle-level learners try everything they can to prove they are no longer children, yet one foot is still squarely planted in childhood's door.

Each time I'm with middle school students, I am newly struck by this phenomenon. One day in Kyle's classroom, I watched two young “men” come crashing into the classroom, calling a fellow student “Crackhead” and discussing a fight that was to take place later in the day. Within minutes those same two “boys” were curled up in one chair, sharing a set of headphones and listening to *Disney's The Lion King* on tape. One of them was cuddling a teddy bear, and they were both totally engrossed in the recording. It was both painful and heartwarming to watch.

The literacy workshop was designed to help students not only survive this stage of their lives but flourish in it. If we take individual things students say as our cues for what they want or need, we can become confused:

Ms. Gonzalez, could you put *Beauty and the Beast* on the tape recorder for me?

I don't need to learn to read. I have a hundred thousand dollars waiting in the bank for me when I turn eighteen.

Would you read *Mr. and Mrs. Bo Jo Jones* to me?

From a geophysicist's point of view, I'd like to diaphragm this poem for you.

Obviously, each of these students in the literacy workshop is in a different place—developmentally and academically. That range of adolescent needs and abilities is the hallmark of teaching and learning with middle-level learners. Adolescence brings about its own set of physical, cognitive, and emotional changes; when these changes are combined with the at-risk characteristics that many adolescents exhibit, the result can be challenging. Our design for the literacy workshop is based on not only understanding this difficult time in these students' lives but also using that energy and tentativeness to once again try to hook these learners as readers and writers.

Perhaps the first step in creating effective literacy programs for middle-level learners is understanding the changes adolescents are experiencing. Middle school teachers observe learners in the throes of these changes hundreds of times each day, and good teachers recognize that these changes influence students' ability and willingness to learn. In *Adolescence* (1993), Laurence Steinberg identifies the fundamental changes of adolescence as biological, cognitive, and social transitions. Each of these transitions has a major impact on what curriculum can and should be in the middle school.

* * * Biological Transitions

One of the things that Kyle has noticed as she watches her students progress from sixth through eighth grade is their awareness of themselves and their bodies. For example, when her current eighth-grade boys were in sixth grade, they often shared cushions and cuddled together as they read. Two of the boys even continued to share one set of headphones for recorded books when they went into the seventh grade. Now that students are in the eighth grade, however, every student has his or her own place during independent reading. Some students still congregate in the same areas, but they always make sure there is a safe amount of distance between them so that no one will think they are touching.

Such actions are characteristic of adolescents who are experiencing biological transitions: “The adolescent’s changed physical appearance may elicit new sorts of behavior from peers, parents, and others, and these new reactions may prompt the adolescent to adjust his or her behavior and self-image” (Steinberg 1993, 38). For adolescents in the throes of such intense physical changes, school can be a frightening place. Each day some student or other awakens with a different body than he or she had the day before. Comfort or discomfort with this new person has everything to do with how successfully he or she negotiates school that day. A school day and curriculum that allow for some choice of learning, a place where one can be alone and quiet or work with others, a way to find the care and feedback of a supportive adult, and resources that will answer the questions and worries that are always present will help students feel safe. A curriculum that is too structured, too lockstep, will add to students’ feelings that there is no room for them and their needs in school.

This is not to suggest that students should be free just to hang out and find themselves. It is a reminder of the responsibility we have to help students learn to make reasonable and meaningful choices from a range of options. Literacy workshop allows teachers to set up classrooms in which these options can occur simultaneously: some students can be reading independently or with recorded books; others can be working together on a research project; a few can be at the computers writing or conducting research; students who need the teacher’s individual attention can be receiving that through “check-ins” and conferences. This structure (and it does take organization to have so many things going on at once) allows for some of the messiness that comes with real learning. In *bird by bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* (1994), Anne Lamott reminds us of the importance of such messiness: “What people somehow (inadvertently, I’m sure) forgot to mention when we were children was that we need to make messes in order to find out who we are and why we are here” (32). There needs to be room in the literacy workshop for students to “make messes.”

*** Cognitive Transitions

Kyle spent a considerable amount of time deciding whether or not to do a unit on segregation with her eighth graders. There was a diverse group of students in her class and race had been a big issue, but discussions about tolerance had not been very effective. In fact, the students who had been in the Literacy Project for two years were extremely intolerant of five students who were new to the project. She finally decided to assign Melba Beals’s memoir *Warriors Don’t Cry* as shared reading and use this literary experience to discuss fairness, tolerance, and segregation. During the shared reading and discussion, Kyle was not always sure whether stu-

dents were internalizing the events and transferring them to their own lives. They still called each other hateful names and often showed intolerance for differences ranging from physical traits to cultural background.

While students did not immediately appear to be learning anything about tolerance, as the weeks passed, they continued to circle back to their reading and discussion of this book. One day Chanelle asked, "Is Chink a racist word?" When Kyle told her it was, she returned to her reading. Shortly after that, students who had been calling each other "Nigger" began catching themselves, looking at Kyle, and apologizing to her. Epithets like "porch monkey," "cracker," and "honky" began to be heard less. By the end of the year, when Kyle asked students to write about one important thing they had learned, a large number of students chose something related to segregation. These students had begun to step outside themselves in order to look at issues from multiple perspectives.

Steinberg (1993) lists five areas in which we can begin to see changes in adolescents' thinking: thinking about what is possible instead of just what is real; thinking about abstract things; thinking about thinking; thinking about multiple issues; and, seeing things as relative rather than absolute (58). The literacy workshop is designed to immerse students in problem solving, complex reading and writing tasks, critical thinking, reflection and self-assessment, real-world connections, and extended goal setting. Each of these is undertaken with the support of teachers, peers, and knowledgeable others so that students begin to internalize a process for thinking through complex issues.

The balanced literacy program in literacy workshop is modeled after Margaret Mooney's *Reading to, with, and by Children* (1990), which suggests that teachers need to provide time and support for the four stages of Vygotsky's zone of proximal development: performance is assisted by others; performance is assisted by the learner; performance becomes automatized/fossilized; and the process is repeated when new levels of difficulty are encountered (Tharpe and Gallimore 1988). Time and instructional support are built into the workshop for reading to students (reading aloud), reading with students (shared and guided reading), and reading by students (independent reading). The same balanced model is used for writing. Students have opportunities to see learning processes modeled by their teachers and their peers, time to continue learning these processes and strategies with one another, and time to practice independently to gain fluency. As new or more difficult materials and concepts are encountered, the teacher returns to the modeling stage. In this way, the students receive the scaffolding they need.

* * * Social Transitions

A poignant story from Kyle's classroom illustrates the range of social transitions that adolescents experience. During Jeff's second year in the pro-

gram, he was reading aloud in a small group of seventh- and eighth-grade guys. (This was a particularly rough group, and Kyle had talked with them about practicing before reading out loud and being sensitive to other students when they are reading.) Jeff soon started stumbling over words, and Carl jumped all over him. There was a moment of silence, and then Jeff started sobbing. Twenty minutes still remained in the class, and here was this big boy sobbing while his classmates stared at him. Not sure what she should do, Kyle took Carl out into the hall to talk with him about how his comments had upset Jeff. Although she was really angry, she tried to remain calm. In the midst of her talk with Carl, *he* started to cry. Kyle was now really worried that the eighth-grade boys would make fun of both boys outside class—a sure invitation for disaster. She left Carl where he was and came back into the room to console Jeff, patting his shoulder and reassuring him that his hard work in reading was helping him improve. Jeff’s entire body was shaking with his sobs. Finally, he said, “I feel like I work so hard and I’m still so far behind everyone else.” Then the most amazing thing happened. The eighth-grade boys Kyle had worried about the most gathered around Jeff saying, “Come on, man, it’s okay.” Contrary to what Kyle had expected based on their past behavior, the whole class supported Jeff and Carl, either by encouraging them with words or walking over and standing near them.

Jeff, Carl, and the other students in this class were redefining the kind of people they would be in relation to others. Steinberg sees this as one of the fundamental changes we can expect during adolescence: “The presence during adolescence of some sort of recognition that the individual’s status has changed—a social redefinition of the individual—is universal” (1993, 90). While the characteristics of this change will vary by person, gender, and culture, it is a necessary step toward adulthood. Social redefinition is promoted when students connect with fictional adolescents who are also in transition.

In many societies, the rites of passage from childhood to adulthood are clearly marked. Ceremonies end one period and begin another. Tasks and behavior are expected depending on the stage of life one is in. In Lois Lowry’s *The Giver*, Jonas waits for the Ceremony of the Twelves to receive his adult work; in Michael Dorris’s *Sees Behind Trees*, Walnut uses his skills to gain his adult name. In our society, those passages are much less clear, and the disequilibrium caused by that lack of clarity causes a lot of upheaval in a lot of middle schools. Adolescents are aware that they are in transition, yet the work inherent to that transition is seldom talked about.

The literature, activities, and personal and academic goal-setting work in the literacy workshop are geared to provide time to read, write, think, and talk about what this time in adolescents’ lives can mean. The literature we read focuses on issues that middle-level learners wonder and worry about: relationships, survival, being different, being alone, and physical appearance. The goal-setting activities and projects help students develop the habit of working toward personal and academic