

## Language Arts Journal of Michigan

---

Volume 15 | Issue 1

Article 13

---

1-1-1999

# Question: What's a Teacher Supposed to Do? Answer: You Gotta BE the Teacher

Barbara Kane Schneider

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lajm>

---

### Recommended Citation

Kane Schneider, Barbara (1999) "Question: What's a Teacher Supposed to Do? Answer: You Gotta BE the Teacher," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 15: Iss. 1, Article 13.

Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1404>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Language Arts Journal of Michigan by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@gvsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@gvsu.edu).

---

# Professional Book Review

Barbara Kane Schneider

---

Question: What's a teacher supposed to do?  
Answer: You gotta BE the teacher.

I started teaching in the late '60s, and since that time, it seems as though I've had innumerable "experts" tell me how to make my teaching successful by making my content meaningful. John Crowe Ransom told me how to make texts meaningful. John Ciardi told me how to make poems meaningful. Louise Rosenblatt told me how to make texts personally meaningful. John E. Warriner told me where to put periods and apostrophes so that texts would be meaningful for others. Richard and JoAnne Vacca told me how to teach reading so that different content areas would be meaningful (unless, of course, I was in a Jeanne Chall or a Carol Edelsky frame of mind). Robert Ruddell told me that I could become an "influential teacher" by making texts meaningful for students. It seems that everyone is busily constructing meaning. I have shelves and shelves of books telling me how to "do it." But telling someone how to be an effective teacher is akin to telling someone how to ride a bicycle or make perfect spaghetti sauce. As Jeffrey Wilhelm exhorts his students "*You Gotta BE the Book*," my experiences tell me "*You Gotta BE the Teacher*" if we teachers are going to construct personal meaning of our teaching practice. Passively accepting the meanings that others construct for us is akin to reading the *Cliff's Notes* of our own teaching practice. The construction of meaning requires active engagement. The dilemma lies in developing the motivation and methodology to engage actively.

Zoe Donoahue, Mary Ann Van Tassell, and Leslie Patterson have edited *Research in the Classroom: Talk, Texts, and Inquiry* (IRA, 1996), a brief (122 page) paperback featuring nine teachers and their reports about classroom research. Whether it is called action research, teacher research, or teacher-led inquiry, these teachers have attempted to research their own questions in their own classrooms. Leslie Patterson's essay suggests that "teachers invite their students to join the inquiry, to use a range of tools-

journals, discussions, and storytelling-to explore and question the world around them" (3). The implication is that inquiry drives learning, professional development, and eventually curriculum.

Franca Fedele's essay is a more practical discussion detailing her own experiences as a classroom researcher interested in promoting journaling in her practice. She discusses her own realization of "... the power of writing to increase one's learning" resulting in the creation of "think books" for her students to record their personal thoughts for ten minutes each day (39-40). She then includes examples from her students' journals and a discussion of what she learned about their thinking processes based upon reading these entries. Fedele used audiotapes, videotapes, transcripts, Think Books, and self-evaluation to focus her own reflections about promoting independent group discussion and fostering within her students the desire to answer their own questions. While her students were involved with research, she asked them questions similar to the ones that she was asking herself: "What did you learn about doing research?" and "What did you learn about yourself while doing research?" (46). What had started as an interest in promoting journaling became an evolving story of her own professional development and how that development drove curriculum in her classroom.

Zoe Donoahue's essay "Collaboration, Community, and Communication: Modes of Discourse for Teacher Research" was the result of a class requirement for a Master of Education degree. Donoahue, a fourth grade teacher in an urban elementary school with 180 students, was interested in developing a more effective way of teaching spelling. She convinced seven of her colleagues to work with her in a systematized manner to design a new spelling program. In addition, she included university faculty and fellow university researchers, resulting in a broader study about how professional communities can communicate with and support one another. She discusses the roles of e-mail, audiotaping, transcriptions of tapes, and collaboration, and how they affected the groups involved (106).

Donoahue suggests that what started as her concern about spelling instruction led to the development of a research community. She comments, "Teacher research often begins with one teacher working alone with his or her students, but its full power and influence is not felt until the community is extended beyond the classroom walls" (102).

While *Research in the Classroom* contains a variety of perspectives and is certainly meant to encourage classroom teachers to do research, it falls short in crucial ways. It fails to portray the role of researcher as an attractive one where the teacher experiences the personal fulfillment of discovering what works and what doesn't. There are no shared epiphanies where the teacher/researcher discovers that his/her professional life and the lives of the students are better, easier, more meaningful, more efficient, or even more enjoyable. It does not present convincing arguments that classroom research is realistic, desirable, or even fun. Unfortunately, most teachers do not think of themselves as researchers, but if teachers are going to be empowered to assume ownership of their own practice and make informed decisions in classrooms, this mindset must be addressed. As a precursor to a discussion on the many roles that teachers perform, I often ask my students to draw a picture of a researcher. Most sketch pictures of people wearing white lab coats and holding test tubes. No one has ever drawn a picture of a teacher working with children. Teachers resist research because many view it as not relevant to classroom practice, boring, and even foreign to the profession. Researchers are often characterized as people who are divorced from the "real" school world, who communicate with each other in technical jargon, and who are funded by grants from obscure organizations. Unfortunately, *Research in the Classroom* does not beguile us into rethinking that image.

The physical layout of the book is consistent with its content. While the text print is large and written in two columns, making it easily decodable, there are virtually no visuals, just one web and one small chart. There are no pictures of children or teachers or even of children's work. Sometimes the language is difficult to the point of being exclusionary. Do many of us talk about schools as "discourse communities" or of discourse mediating learning? While the writers certainly had stories to tell, their language stood in the way of the telling. I wanted to write in the margins "just talk to me." As we encourage children to see themselves as readers and writers, so too we need to see ourselves as researchers, and I didn't see myself in this book.

Is motivating teachers to become self-conscious and deliberate an impossible task? Am I being unrealistic in my expectations? I don't think so. MacArthur Prize winning kindergarten teacher Vivian Gussin Paley in *You Can't Say You Can't Play* compellingly describes how and why she instituted a nonexclusionary rule during class playtime. The implications are profound and convincing. In *The Girl with the Brown Crayon*, Paley describes how she in-

volves her students with Leo Lionni's books and engages, with them, in the mutual making of meaning. There is no jargon or abstract philosophy.

Nancie Atwell's two editions of *In the Middle* have had a profound influence on how many of us think about the teaching of writing. We can identify with her vulnerability and admire her ingenuity. We can understand her methodology and her rationale. The first time I read *In the Middle*, I thought, "I can see myself doing that!" Linda Winston's *Keepsakes: Using Family Stories in Elementary Classrooms* tells of attempts to value family in classrooms. It is a practical book detailing many useful strategies, but it also motivates the reader to see the possibilities for curriculum. Most of us do not think of these wonderful books as classroom research efforts, but they are. This is the kind of research that motivates action that explains conclusions, that demonstrates methodology, and that profoundly affects our definitions of "best practice."

Ultimately, the goal of classroom research has to be to empower teachers to examine their own practice and to take ownership of it. No teacher preparation program can possibly prepare every prospective teacher for all of the possible permutations that could lie ahead. In speaking with teachers, Gordon Wells responded to the question, "What should I do in my particular situation?" by answering, "Furthermore, the only valid answers are the ones that individual teachers construct in the light of their knowledge of themselves, their students, and the setting—colleagues, school system, and community—in which they work . . ." (Wells 220). Unfortunately, *Research in the Classroom*, while well intentioned, falls short.

## Works Cited

- Atwell, Nancie. *In the Middle*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1998.
- Donoahue, Zoe, Mary Ann Van Tassell, & Leslie Patterson, eds. *Research in the Classroom: Talk, Texts, and Inquiry*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 1996.
- Paley, Vivian Gussin. *The Girl With the Brown Crayon*. Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *You Can't Say You Can't Play*. Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993.
- Wells, Gordon. *The Meaning Makers: Children Learning Language and Using Language to Learn*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1986.
- Willhelm, Jeffrey D. "You Gotta Be the Book": *Teaching Engaged and Reflective Reading with Adolescents*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1997.
- Winston, Linda. *Keepsakes: Using Family Stories in Elementary Classrooms*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1997.

## About the author

Barbara Kane Schneider is an assistant professor of English at Grand Valley State University and has served on numerous reading association boards.